DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 110 RC 017 234

AUTHOR	Daly, Carson, Ed.; Stern, Joyce D., Ed.
TITLE	Rural Education: A Changing Landscape.
INSTITUTION	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	PIP-89-840
PUB DATE	May 89
NOTE	158p.; Papers presented at the Rural Education Symposium (Washington, DC, March 1987).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Conference Proceedings (021) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC07 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Improvement; Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; Rural Areas; Rural Development; Rural Economics; *Rural Education; *Rural Schools; *Rural Urban Differences; Small Schools; Socioeconomic Influences
IDENTIFIERS	Nonmetropolitan Areas

ABSTRACT

This collection features 11 papers from a national symposium on rural education. The papers are consistent in noting that while there are common elements among all schools regardless of location, rural schools operate within a unique context. Several papers address the diversity of rural locales and the challenges educators face in such locales. Other papers discuss characteristics of rural youth and schooling, rural school improvement strategies, and special problems and issues--such as the unpredictability of the rural economy and employment--in many rural areas. The papers and their authors include: "Observations of a Rural Legislator," Steven Cutler; "Enlisting Community Support to Make Policy Work," Chuck Johnson; "Rural Education Reform and Rural Youth in the United States: Some Thoughts with Special Reference to the South," Frank M. Howell; "Demographic Trends Relevant to Education in Nonmetropolitan America," David L. Brown; "An Alternative to the Traditional Funding of Small, Rural Schools," David H. Monk; "Rural Education and the Reform Movement," Roy H. Forbes; "A Local School Perspective," James D. Jess; "An Education Writer's Reflections on Rural Education," Jack L. Kennedy; "Implementations of Promising Practices: Necessary Conditions," Cheryl Chase Kane; "Improving Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness in Rural Schools," Herman W. Myers; and "The McREL Approach to Rural School Improvement," Paul M. Nachtigal. An appendix lists other symposium participants and their papers. (TES)

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RC017284

RURAL EDUCATION

A Changing Landscape

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May 1989

Introduction

The one-room schoolhouse still evokes nostalgia in the hearts of Americans. Our history as a democratic nation is tied to the development of such schools in small towns and settlements across the country. From their beginnings in the earliest dame schools in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the rough-hewn log buildings that dotted the Great Plains as pioneers moved West, rural schools have played an important role in educating generations of Americans.

Few of today's rural schools resemble those by-gone, pastoral images. Frequently, a satellite dish can be found in the schoolyard and in some rural areas, the one room has been expanded to a campus as complex as those found in urban areas. Although modern America is overwhelmingly urban, more than a quarter of our citizens, 56 million people spread across 2,400 of America's 3,100 counties, live in nonmetropolitan areas. And given our mobility, we know that many citizens educated in rural schools are now part of the urban and suburban communities.

Aware that strong rural schools continue to play a vital role in American education, Congress, in the fall of 1986, appropriated funds for a rural education initiative. The Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) sponsored a national symposium on rural education in the spring of 1987 to help guide development of that initiative. Nationally known experts presented papers on education in rural America from a variety of perspectives, and practitioners described promising educational practices in rural settings. *Rural Education: A Changing Landscape* now offers the symposium papers to the public. (Everyone featured at the symposium is identified in the Appendix.)

The papers in this publication are consistent in noting that while there are commonalities among all schools regardless of location, rural schools operate within a unique context. For example, several papers mention the great diversity of locales that constitute "rural" and the different challenges they face because of that diversity. These settings frequently vary within the boundaries of a given State. Other papers discuss characteristics of rural youth and schooling; school improvement strategies particularly suited to rural education; and special problems and issues—such as the unpredictability of the rural economy and the current employment and financial difficulties—in many rural areas.

At the same time, the presentations note the traditional strengths of rural schools that will help them combat these and other problems. They underscore the rich heritage of these schools and the special quality of life in rural areas. Several point out the close link between schools and rural development, noting that rural schools hold the key to the future of their communities. When rural communities can harness the necessary time and energy, they build upon their strengths to improve schools.

This document has been prepared to inform a wider audience interested in learning about and responding to the needs of rural schools. States and localities across our Nation are increasingly dedicated to this effort. While the Federal role, geared to promote and disseminate new and improved approaches to rural education, is necessarily limited, we in the Department of Education happily join in this work. Our aim is one: to serve the children, their families, and their communities throughout our country. These efforts show that the potential to further revitalize education in rural America is very great, indeed.

Bruno V. Manno
Acting Assistant Secretary for Educational
Research and Improvement

Acknowledgments

The symposium on rural education and this document were produced in the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), Programs for the Improvement of Practice (PIP), Milton Goldberg, Director. They were developed under the general guidance of David P. Mack, director of PIP's Education Networks Division. Gail Gordon of PIP originally spearheaded and coordinated the entire project, while Carson Daly of OERI's Information Services (IS) was the initial editor of the papers.

Joyce D. Stern (PIP) assumed the editing responsibility, working with several authors to extensively revise their papers, and developed the final version of this volume. Copy editing and preparation of the manuscript were managed by Mark Travaglini of IS. The design of this book was conceived and executed by Kate Dorrell and Phil Carr, both of IS.

The seminar and this publication were the result of collaborative efforts by many individuals both within and without the U.S. Department of Education. Staff members of the Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), members of the regional educational laboratories, rural education experts throughout the country, personnel from State departments of education, and officials of several national organizations helped identify individuals to present background and issue papers on rural education at the symposium. Others were invited to describe promising practices in the field. PIP staff member Carol Mitchell played a major role in this regard and also contributed significantly to the coordination of all aspects of the symposium.

From outside of OERI, members of the symposium planning committee included Ivan Charner (National Institute of Work and Learning), Darlene Pierce (American Association of School Administrators), Robert Morrison (the Department's Office of Vocational and Adult Education), and E. Robert Stephens (University of Maryland).

John Coulson of PIP gave critical guidance on how to conceptualize and draft two of the symposium papers. Other OERI staff members who made constructive comments on original drafts of these and other papers included Joe Vaughan, Lynn Spencer, Lois Weinberg, Emily Wurtz, Laurence Rudner, Steven Thom, Charles Haughey, Paul Cawein, and Gordon McAndrew. External reviewers were Joseph Newlin (Executive Director, The National Rural Education Association), Walter Turner (American Association of School Administrators), and E. Robert Stephens.

The manuscript was typed by Alonzo Butler and Betty Welch (PIP); and Sharon Scales, Valerie Ross, and Joann Harrigan (IS). Adria White (PIP) gave valuable service as proofreader of the entire manuscript at various stages of production and also provided many editing suggestions. Mamie Brown of IS helped proofread the final manuscript.

Finally, recognition should also be made of the unique contributions of former Assistant Secretary for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Chester E. Finn, Jr., and his special assistant, Ed Larson. It was during their tenure that this symposium took place. They gave valuable guidance during its development and to the overall efforts made in successfully launching the Department's Rural Education Initiative.

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Section I

Characteristics of Rural Youth and Schooling

Observations of a Rural Legislator

Steven Cutler

Steven Cutler, whose graduating high school class numbered 13, is a family farmer and a State legislator. In his leadership position in the South Dakota House of Representatives, and as a layman, he is committed to promoting excellence in education.

The value of a rural education, compared to that in a large city, has always been controversial. Some people argue that almost no one can get a good education in a small, rural school, and that current technological trends are making it even more unlikely in the future. I disagree. Nationally recognized tests have shown that rural students consistently score higher than others. I am convinced that with proper preparation and planning, rural youngsters can receive an excellent education.

Rural Education a Generation Ago

To understand rural education, one must be familiar with the context in which it operates. Twenty or 30 years ago, when I was growing up in South Dakota, everything centered around the family. The family was more important than anything else—school, work, sports, or entertainment. No matter what else happened in the world, the family was solid. Family life in South Dakota was invincible, and I knew there was nothing that could destroy my family. Despite economic adversity, any difficulty at school, or peer pressure, I knew that Mom and Dad would always be there when I needed them. Unfortunately, for many rural students, this situation no longer exists. Inevitably, this has caused additional problems in rural schools.

In those days, education was simple, but good. Schools usually had small enrollments, a limited number of teachers, and few electives from which to choose, but they gave their highly competitive students a good grounding in math and English. At Claremont, where I went to school, yearly high school enrollment (9th-12th grades) averaged 40 students, and the entire teaching staff numbered 4—including the superintendent and principal! Despite this shortage of personnel, I had excellent teachers in English and mathematics. As a result, I received an adequate base for higher education. Even though our small school could not

offer courses like drafting or advanced physics, our basic education in math prepared those in my class to compete with much better trained students. Indeed, in South Dakota, students from small schools consistently rank at the top of the class at the University. My own high school class numbered only 13, but that class eventually produced two civil engineers, an architect, two mathematics majors, and three teachers. This suggests that a good basic education can overcome too few electives and technical courses.

In the past, State funding was minimal. Local taxes mainly paid for a basic education. In 1968, the average cost of educating a student for one year in South Dakota was $576. Even though real property taxes were almost soley responsible for providing this amount, the farm economy at that time was good. Although prices for agricultural products were almost as high as they are now, expenses were very low, and farm equity, fueled by non-stop inflation, increased rural net worth every year. Moreover, taxes necessary to fund education were not excessive. As a result, local taxes could provide adequate funding.

Problems Facing Rural Schools

Today, large scale State involvement is necessary because the economic disaster in rural areas is threatening to undermine the funding of South Dakota's public schools. Currently, 14-20 percent of farm families in South Dakota are in serious financial trouble. As a result, rural schools need increased State funding to relieve the excessive burden real property taxes now impose. Fortunately, we are moving in that direction.

The weakening of the family is another difficulty for rural schools. Divorce is now common in rural areas; in fact, in a neighboring school, 50 percent of the first-grade students come from broken homes. This has caused problems that many rural schools were unprepared to consider. Such schools generally do not have adequate professional counseling services or the support groups available in urban settings. Today, rural schools have all the problems of larger schools—like drug abuse and teen-age pregnancy—but are less well prepared to address them.

One of the biggest problems rural education faces in South Dakota is a shortage of students who want to become teachers. This shortage is probably related to the low salaries teachers earn here—the lowest in the Nation. Since 73 percent of all school funding is raised from real property taxes, the tax base simply cannot support significantly higher salaries. As a result, South Dakota is losing its finest students to other fields—a situation we've done little to correct. As the salary gap widens between rural and urban teachers, this is becoming a crisis in rural education. South Dakota must not and cannot accept this gap as inevitable. The State must close this gap quickly, but what should it do? And, as a legislator, what should be my goal for South Dakota's educational improvements?

The Issue of Funding Equity

We need to ensure equal educational opportunity for every child in South Dakota. Every student deserves an excellent education—whether he lives in Claremont or in Sioux Falls. Equity presents a problem, though, because we have such diverse school districts. The number of high school students in a South Dakota district can be as low as 28 or as high as 4,000. The average yearly cost to educate a student ranges from $2,600 to $5,800. Such statistics have generated the "big school-little school" debate currently raging in South Dakota.

The issue is how to divide the State's educational funds among the school districts. South Dakota recently passed a law inaugurating a new formula to determine how much State funding schools will receive. In the past, the formula consisted of a flat grant supplemented by an equalization program. The flat grant awarded every school district funds based on the number of classroom units the school needed to function. So, every school received some funding for basic education. Some districts received additional equalization funds based on how much they could raise in local funds through real property taxes. Obviously, some districts were able to raise much more this way than others and, therefore, needed fewer State funds.

The new distribution formula, which abolished the flat grant, concentrates on the equalization formula to determine State aid to

education. Now each school district determines its budget, subtracts all local forms of revenue, and submits that figure to the South Dakota State Department of Education. The Department then determines a district's ability to raise funds locally (through real property taxes) and subtracts this amount from the proposed budget. The resulting difference is the amount the State gives the local school district.

Although the program does equalize amounts received from property taxes throughout the State, the formula has created additional problems in rural education. Those who developed the formula did not adequately consider current trends in the worth of agricultural property. At the present time, values assigned to agricultural property are artificially high because property taxes are based on the land's true value; but, because of the economic climate, few owners have been able to sell their land at those true-value prices. Unfortunately, this results in reduced State aid to rural school districts.

The formula is ineffective because it equalizes *taxes* instead of ensuring an adequate education for every *child*. What's worse, the formula has intensified South Dakota's reliance on real property taxes when economic conditions cry out for another solution.

Possible Remedies

Adjustments have relieved some of the pressure. Since small, rural schools have a built-in higher cost per student, mill levy deductions are given to schools based on the number of students in attendance. Also, no school lost more than 10 percent of the State aid it had received the previous year. Changes in the sales-ratio formula have also allowed more accurate calculation of the value of agricultural property. Although welcome, these provisions will not totally fix the situation; moreover, they guarantee a transition period for rural schools already beset by serious difficulties.

Clearly, the State will have to play a greater role in education and is moving in that direction. State aid to education, which has risen from $32 million in 1978 to over $87 million in 1987, will continue to increase.

We face a formidable challenge. Enrollment in our State had gone from 174,000 students in 1968 to only 132,000 just 12 years later. At the same time, the cost of education has risen dramatically. How will we cope with these changes?

By assuming more responsibility for education, the State will continue to provide students with excellent training. Recent developments show that both the new governor and the legislature are committed to education. A new, supplemental teacher-pay formula is being designed to help raise teachers' salaries. Districts will receive money on a "matching basis" as an incentive to improve local salaries. Rural co-ops will continue to provide teachers for special subjects like speech therapy, counseling, and high-tech courses. An economic development package providing $120 million for South Dakota to expand the tax base and provide employment should also help the State to fund schools.

I believe that the future is bright for South Dakota and for its rural schools. Our students continue to score well on all national tests. They rank near the 70th percentile in the Stanford Achievement Tests and score 1.1 points higher on the ACT composites than the national average. South Dakota also boasts a very low high school dropout rate—2.18 percent. So we are succeeding and we shall continue to do so. The task will not be easy, but South Dakota is firmly committed to providing the citizens of tomorrow with an excellent basic education.

Mark Medoff, reporting in *The New York Times*, expressed South Dakota's attitude toward education well.

> Everything I will ever pass on to my students, to my children, is an inseparable part of an ongoing legacy of our shared wonder and eternal hope that we can, *must*, make ourselves better.

The Role of the Community in Effective Policymaking

Chuck Johnson

Chuck Johnson, a former teacher, has been a school board member of the Mammoth/San Manuel Unified School District since 1980. He is also president of the Arizona School Boards Association, a member of the steering committee for the National School Boards Association's Rural District Forum, and a board member of the Arizona Alliance for Arts Education.

A Local District Responds to a Drug Problem

On December 3, 1984, a 60-day investigation in the Mammoth/San Manuel Unified School District culminated in a drug bust at the high school. It was the first time on record that one of Arizona's law enforcement officers had gone undercover as an enrolled student to investigate drug use. Since October 5, a young undercover agent from the Pinal County Sheriff's Department had passed himself off as a troubled youth who had been disowned by his parents. Pretending to be living with foster parents in San Manuel, he enrolled in the high school and was readily accepted by drug users on campus—perhaps because he was well known for treating teachers and community police disrespectfully.

When his job ended, however, that of the administration and the school board was just beginning. The officer had done the inital investigation undercover, but the superintendent and president of the school board had to follow up with the entire community watching. (The author is the president of the school board.)

First, they had to ask and answer some tough questions: What drugs were being used and how widespread were they? How would students and the community react to the undercover operations and the district's policy and procedures for handling drug abuse on campus?

The Mammoth/San Manuel Unified School District, located in southeastern Pinal County in Arizona, is made up of one lower elementary school (kindergarten through third grade), one upper elementary school (fourth through sixth grade), one junior high school, and one high school of approximately 650 students. The district also has one elementary school (kindergarten through sixth grade) located in the town of Mammoth, approximately 10 miles south of San Manuel.

The seventh and eighth graders in Mammoth, along with the community's high school students, are transported by bus to San Manuel daily. The district also serves high school students for the community of Oracle, 12 miles southeast of San Manuel. The total student population numbers approximately 1,900—half of whom are Hispanic.

The three communities are distinctly different. In San Manuel, a rental property town owned by the Magma Copper Company, everyone is employed. Oracle and Mammoth are smaller communities with privately owned housing. Mammoth residents, who are primarily Hispanic, are in the lower income range. Approximately one-third of the teachers commute from Tucson, which is 50 miles from the tri-community area.

The entire area is beginning to grow—which causes some problems for local school districts. The copper company is divesting itself of homes in San Manuel and they have offered to sell them to community residents. They are also selling the land surrounding the town to attract other industries and to spread the tax base. Growth from the Tucson area is also affecting Oracle where the population could swell to 30,000 in the next 10 years.

Currently, the copper industry provides the area's sole economic base. In 1983, Magma cut its workforce by one-third; in 1986, the labor contract reduced wages by 20 percent. In the last 5 years, local tax valuation has also dropped drastically. Although the copper industry in Arizona has been devastated by foreign imports, Magma is building a flash furnace which will be one of the largest in the world. So, stability should be returning to the area.

But the economic disruptions during the last 4 years caused distinct problems for local school children. The school district had to cope not only with budgetary constraints imposed by declining enrollment, but also with the emotional upheaval resulting from insecure jobs and the financial pressures of wage reduction. Since family tensions ultimately affect children, the schools have had to try to relieve some of the pressure. Counseling programs have increased, and, in many instances, changes in curriculum have been necessary.

Before Magma cut its workforce in 1983, the high school's vocational education program prepared seniors to work in the copper industry. This program was so successful that its graduates started at $20,000 per year, when beginning teachers were being paid only $14,000. After Magma cut its workforce, there were no jobs for graduating seniors. Consequently, much of the vocational education curriculum was obsolete overnight. The school board had to alter it immediately to meet students' changing needs. Fortunately, the flexibility that often characterizes small, rural schools enabled the district to make the necessary changes easily.

The schools could not control the economic hardships that had befallen area residents, but they were determined to combat drug-related problems. In 1971, drug abuse was mainly confined to young adults who were out of school. Seventh and eighth graders were interested in motorcycles and sports, not drugs. By 1984, however, drugs had infiltrated the Mammoth/San Manuel Unified School District, and the community began to face the problems larger urban school systems have faced for many years.

The school board formulated a tough policy on alcohol and drug abuse. The policy required a "no less than 30-, no more than 90-day" suspension for violations and did not allow students to make up missed assignments. The policy also specified that students could not re-enroll until they had served the suspension and (with their parents) had completed drug counseling.

The December drug bust resulted in the arrest of 18 high school students and one adult who was a major supplier. All arrests were for marijuana; authorities found no speed, cocaine or downers. The bust received extensive media coverage, provoking diverse reactions from school board members from different parts of the State. Some said, "They only found marijuana? Your district doesn't have a drug problem." Regardless of their reaction, they were amazed that no litigation resulted.

The policy our school board designed worked beautifully. Parental support and involvement were tremendous. Every parent of a suspended youngster came to the district office and offered support; some even expressed gratitude. The policy was effective

because it was designed by locally elected school board members who understood the attitudes and make-up of their community. Neither the State board of education nor the State legislature would have had the same sensitivity because they are too far removed from the area to understand the community's problems and the changes it was undergoing.

Abundant Opportunities for Student Participation

Close-knit communities not only facilitate agreement on discipline policies, they also offer students many chances to join in extracurricular activities. Rural school districts offer students more opportunities to participate in after-school clubs and sports than do those in urban areas. In athletics, for example, a larger percentage of the students can participate actively. Athletics are a "big deal" in rural communities and, because the town becomes so involved, the athletes achieve high status in the community, not only in the school.

Rural students also enjoy increased opportunities to participate in various academic clubs. The art club in the Mammoth/San Manuel district is a good example. Every spring the art classes put on a show that is attended not only by students and parents, but also by many community residents who do not have children in school. The local bank exhibits art work from the elementary and high schools all year long. Students love to go into the bank and see a drawing or sculpture they made exhibited for the whole community to see. Parents' pride and pleasure in the students' visible achievements also strengthen the link between the community and the schools.

The personal nature of rural schools also creates a bond between parents and the school system that many large school districts envy. The close ties between parents and teachers and between teachers and students are primarily responsible for this bond.

Teaching Carries Community Responsibilities

It takes a special type of person to be able to live and teach in a rural school system. No one in a town the size of San Manuel is anonymous. The teacher is always a teacher. Parents may stop him or her in the grocery store to find out how their child is doing. Perhaps the teacher will end up umpiring a Little League game in the summer. This kind of informal contact facilitates the development of a special relationship between teachers and students, and between teachers and parents. It also fosters the kind of parental support evident in so many rural communities. The teacher becomes a real person, not just someone who shows up during the week to instruct a class. Marginal and "at risk" students particularly benefit from these types of relationships. Since they receive extra individualized attention, they behave better and feel less alienated.

School Board Members Are Accessible

Designing and implementing school board policy is somewhat easier in rural districts than in many urban ones. In small communities, the school board members know most of the voters in the district personally. As a result, communicating is more direct, causes fewer misunderstandings, and can elicit more community support. The voting population is so small and the board members' visibility so high, that the system's checks and balances work well.

Successful School Board Policy Needs Parental Support

In 1984, the Mammoth/San Manuel Unified School District instituted a district-wide plan that has practically eliminated school vandalism and violence. Since most rural school districts are unified (kindergarten through 12th grade) because of their small populations, it is relatively easy to implement district-wide policies—which are usually more effective. Partly because the parents in the school district support this policy, there has been no school vandalism this year. The changes in the students' behavior is evident not only in the schools, but also in homes and businesses in the community. The new discipline plan could not have succeeded without this parental support. Parental backing and the special relationship between the teachers and students is what made the rural school board policy succeed.

Community Colleges Increase Rural Student Options

Rural school districts often have fewer instructional options than larger urban schools, but the community college movement has partially solved this problem. The Mammoth/San Manuel Unified School District works with the local community college to enable advanced students to take courses at the college that are unavailable at the high school. The college and high school also share vocational education classes. On one occasion, each institution paid half of an autoshop teacher's salary.

Small Schools Mean Individualized Attention in the Classroom

Small schools also give children more individualized attention in the classroom. The Mammoth/San Manuel district runs a large volunteer teacher aide program in the elementary schools to help students one-on-one without unduly straining the budget. Since current research shows that the identification of dropouts begins, and in many cases is decided, in grades one through three, aides work closely with teachers in these grades to give at-risk students more personal attention. The district's successful community school program, which involves many children and adults in special interest activities, enables schools to address other individualized needs. This program, which draws on the special abilities of many area residents, has also strengthened the bond between the community and the schools.

Older Students Take Responsibility for the Behavior of Younger Ones

The Mammoth/San Manuel School District chose not to create a formal drug education program, because its informal approach has been so successful. Building on the close ties typical of a small, rural community, a local behavioral health clinic designed a program that trains selected high school students to counsel elementary children in the classroom. The program's message is that everyone has a choice: everyone can say "no" to drugs, to alcohol abuse, and to disruptive or illegal behavior. The board is currently investigating the possibility of also using the program to teach "sex respect" in the lower elementary grades.

The program is effective because the counseling comes from high school students who are not quite peers, but are not yet adults either. It also helps that the children know and admire these "student teachers" who are selected on the basis of their attitude, not grades. An added benefit seems to be the program's positive effect on the high school students who participate. When they give their yearly report to the board, their enthusiasm and composure are impressive. They seem to enjoy it, too. When the program started, there were virtually no volunteers, but now, 5 years later, the number of volunteers exceeds the demand.

Conclusion

We need to take advantage of the interest that recent national reports on education have piqued across the country. Community bulletins, newspaper articles, and open forum discussions are very effective ways of communicating educational needs in a rural community. Last year, Arizonans placed an item on the ballot to raise the State's aggregate spending limit for education. The superintendent and members of the school board in the district took every opportunity to speak to various local clubs and organizations to push this plan. They and others gave interviews to local newspapers and called voters. These State-wide efforts succeeded—the educational issue was one of only two (out of eight) that passed. Clearly, school board members, particularly those in rural areas, can effect changes—provided they inspire legislators with their own interest in education.

Rural school boards, administrators, and community members working together can make their school districts more productive and responsive to the needs of their students. But as the Mammoth/San Manuel District has shown, improvement of rural schools can succeed only when the school and the community cooperate.

Rural Education Reform and Rural Youth in the United States: Some Thoughts with Special Reference to the South

Frank M. Howell

Frank M. Howell, Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Monitor, Mississippi, Laboratory in the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University, is the creator and executive editor of SocNet, an international computer network for social scientists.

The Department of Education's new Rural Education Initiative marks renewed interest in rural education in America and in rural youth. Too often, however, the widespread belief that rural youth cannot succeed in conventional schooling, that they have "special needs," and face "special conditions," hampers efforts to improve rural schools.

This paper focuses on several aspects of the current movement for rural education reform. These include the *process* of delivering education to rural youth; the South's important role in delivering rural education; targeting rural youth in program reforms; and how the South can best cope with the challenges it faces.

Blaming the Victim: What's Wrong with Rural Youth?

Too often, proponents of rural educational reform focus almost exclusively on the "problems" of rural youth. When Federal programs sponsor initiatives in education reform that focus on the individual "problems" of rural youth, they set up an ideological blueprint for intervention programs in rural schools that can actually victimize them. If this focus results from our wanting to know why being "rural" is a handicap in this country, then we are on the verge of "blaming the victim," as William Ryan (1976) has eloquently shown. If we ask what's "wrong" individually with rural youth that prevents them from being successful in school and later life, then we blame them instead of the school and social systems that have handicapped them. By "blaming the victim" we further condemn those who have already been shortchanged by forces beyond their control.

This kind of rhetoric—unfortunately, all too familiar—focuses on the problem instead of the solution and emphasizes the supposed faults of those who have been victimized rather than their

victimization. When we ask what it is about American blacks that keeps them from succeeding as a group, are we not actually blaming the victims of racism instead of the racist society that has relegated them to second-class status? If we ask what's wrong with women that keeps them from achieving economic parity with men, are we not forgetting structural barriers and systematic sexism that handicap women? When we wonder why Hispanic people do not tend to earn advanced degrees, get white-collar jobs, and receive pay equal to non-Hispanics, are we not blaming the victims of discrimination without questioning the distribution and exercise of power within a discriminatory system? In each of these instances, we implicitly, sometimes inadvertently, "blame the victims." More pragmatically, this rhetoric also focuses the attention of public policy away from solutions that are amenable to intervention.

When we ask what is "wrong" with rural youth that keeps them from successfully completing educational programs, getting good jobs, and receiving equitable pay, are we not also blaming the victims of a complex socio-cultural system? I believe that we are. *We cannot understand the lives of rural youth without understanding the institutions that produce them*. Their well-being results from the complex interplay between individuals and social structures in a cultural context. To ignore one important element in the social network obscures the effects of others and impedes efforts to produce real social change.

Rural Youth Are an Important Segment of Society

For too long, scholars have been discouraged from studying rural youth. Too often the funding patterns of Federal agencies give the impression, at least to this writer, that rural youth as a group are too inconsequential to merit increasingly scarce educational research dollars. In fact, some researchers feel that applying for funds for projects on rural education is a waste of their time. As expressed in some informal professional circles, the common line of thinking in funding agencies is that the increasing trend toward cultural homogenization and urbanization is making this small segment of the population ever more insignificant.

The demographics of rural youth during the 1970s, however, do not suggest the insignificance of rural youth. Jimenez' (1974) profile, based on 1970 U.S. Census data, showed that one-fourth of the United States' population (53.8 million) lived on farms, in open country, or in small towns. One-half (46.4 percent) of this rural population (25 million people) was less than 25 years old. Approximately one-half of those rural youth (10.5 million people) lived in the South, while 30 percent of this rural youth population (7.4 million) lived in the north central region of the United States.

Although these data pertain to 1970, the population turnaround and the subsequent growth in non-metropolitan America (see Beal, 1975; and several papers in Brown and Wardwell, 1980) suggest that these patterns have actually increased.[1] By any objective criterion, we must conclude that rural youth are a large and significant part of the population.

Why have rural youth been so neglected, relative to the attention focused on urban youth, in research and development efforts over the past few decades? Why has this situation persisted? How has a constituency of 25 million people, with almost half of them living in one region of the country, been systematically discounted in research and development efforts? Perhaps rural education has suffered from "benign neglect" because the South is the dominant region for rural youth. I shall return to the implications of this troubling possibility later.

Let's Recognize the Pluralism: Dispelling Some Myths About Rural Youth

As Jonathan Sher (1977) has commented, there is "pluralism in the countryside." Rural youth, like rural people in general (see Willits *et al.*, 1982), are not as alike as conventional wisdom would have us believe. Below, I will correct several apparent myths about rural youth. These myths are relevant to the Rural Education Initiative because they will condition planning and implementation of intervention programs targeted at rural youth.

As corrected, these perceptions *should* be: all rural areas are *not* homogeneous; most rural residents are *not* farmers; they do *not* live lives totally isolated from popular culture; and their

households are *not* universally composed of large, extended families. Elaborations of these points follow:

Rural Does Not Mean Homogeneous. Just as we have inherited stereotypes of other minority groups, there is a tendency to believe that rural youth, to use a slang phrase, "all look alike." In fact, Cosby and Charner discuss rural residents as a *bona fide* social minority:

> Perhaps the strongest argument for a rural minority lies in a linguistic contrast of slang terms used for rural and urban folk. . . . The cultural characteristics . . . contained in the contrast may be seen as a dichotomy between Urban = Superior, and Rural = Inferior. . . . This trend is evident in the nature of knowledge that the larger society has about rural folk. Just as other minorities are stereotyped by the larger society, knowledge about rural folk is remarkably stereotypical in nature. Labels generally carry a negative connotation and represent an urban "put down" of rural people in rural life. This is readily evident in the slang terms "hicks," "rednecks," "plow-boys," "hillbillies," "crackers," "clod-hoppers," and of course, "good ol' boys" and "folk". . . . For those who feel that the notion of rural-urban differences is simply an artifact of the misguided imagination of a few sociologists, we challenge you to construct a comparable list of stereotypical terms for urban folk. (1978: 15-17)[2]

Rural Does Not Mean Farm. For far too long, people have construed "rural" to mean "farm." Nonmetropolitan areas are one of the fastest-growing sectors of the United States and the growth of these areas, coupled with the decline of the family farm, virtually ensure that rural residents are not predominantly farmers (See Brown and Wardwell, 1980). Moreover, the social organization in these ecological areas has changed with the decline in economic dependence upon agriculture (see, for instance, Dillman and Hobbs, 1982 and Beaulieu, 1988). This shift has spawned at least two important consequences for rural youth.

Rural Does Not Mean "Pop-Culturally" Isolated. For many years, social scientists typically measured "level of living" in household surveys by counting the presence of certain possessions in the home to differentiate among families in terms of their cultural standing (e.g., Bluhm, 1975). Although this research was certainly worthwhile, one of the more subtle inferences was that rural youth were deprived because they simply did not have, say, a "goldfish-in-a-bowl" at home. This conclusion was important because of the *image* of rural people that is fostered, rather than how some household artifact(s) might affect them.[3] These studies suggest that rural people are "deprived"—culturally isolated by middle-class, urban-life standards.

In terms of high culture, many rural Americans may still be comparatively isolated, but today they are certainly in the mainstream of popular culture. Their deficit, due to the lack of the metaphorical "goldfish-in-a-bowl" at home, has been replaced with mass consumption patterns of the youth market. The penetration of television into virtually all homes in the United States, coupled with the increase in mass-circulation teen magazines, has put rural youth on par in popular culture with their peers virtually anywhere in the country. The increasing presence of satellite dish antennas in rural areas also suggests that rural youth are increasingly consumers of information geared toward this mass youth market. They know full well what "making money for nothing on MTV" is all about, to borrow a phrase from a contemporary song. Rural youth should no longer be viewed as pop-culturally isolated. This change has many ramifications. One of them is that rural areas are no longer exempt from traditional urban social problems—drugs, alcohol, teen pregnancy, and teen violence.

Rural Does Not Mean Extended Family. Ironically, extended family households, which urbanites considered gauche 20 years ago, are now somewhat back in vogue. According to shows like "The Waltons" or one that preceded it, "The Real McCoys," idyllic extended families characterize rural households. Even if that were once the case, economic circumstances often compel rural youth to leave their families. Since white-collar jobs tend to be located increasingly in urban settings, rural youth must usually leave their homes to move upward economically or to advance in their careers. For the large number of rural youth in the South, this pattern is not likely to improve—in fact, it may even worsen.

The South: Divided by Myths and the Power of Images

The image of the rural South is also a great divider. It cuts between fellow southerners and divides them from those from other regions. Typical discussions of the southern image tend to focus either on "redneck-bashing" or on "rebel-yells." The first suggests a negative view of the South while the latter adopts a defensive stance toward Old Dixie. However, the issue of the urban context of rural policymaking (Cosby, 1980) takes the discussion beyond these dialectical images.

Some may dismiss the complaint that important social policies are created in places alien to those on whom they have the most impact. To such people, the situation is inevitable in "a society in transition from a rural to urban dominance" (Cosby, 1980:38). Such a defense, however, is tantamount to claiming that cultural oppression of rural areas is the natural state of affairs in industrial societies.

When legislators and others make rural policy in an urban context, they fall prey to a subtle, yet powerful form of what we would call "cultural imperialism." The policymakers in northern, urban industrial areas who often devise programs for southern, rural, agricultural locales, frequently do not recognize that their own preconceptions may well be unsubstantiated. This phenomenon is very difficult to empirically demonstrate. Nonetheless, the perspective of Erwin Gross, a native of Germany who chose Jackson, Mississippi, to build his manufacturing plant, suggests how cultural bias can operate. Mr. Gross (as reported in Garreau, 1981:130) comments:

> If you talk to people in the [North], they just don't know . . . *where* [Mississippi] is, sometimes. . . . They ask you, "Where do you come from?"
>
> "Jackson, Mississippi."
>
> "Blaaah," they say. They just have a negative [attitude]. But if you ask them, have you been in Jackson? They say no. Do you know where it is? [Yes], I know, down in the [South]. How many people live there? What's going on there? They don't know . . . . But they have opinions. I don't know where they get their information from. Maybe 20 years ago, 30 years ago, it was a certain way of life here, and they still believe it. . . . They really don't know that the [South] has changed a lot!

Cosby calls another fallacy that often hurts the rural areas "local generalizing." This occurs when people assume that *all* of rural America is basically like the rural area they know. So, a New Englander imagines all rural America to be like rustic areas of Cape Cod, while southerners consider all rural districts to be analogous to their own. Thus southerners' perception of their own uniqueness also divides them from others. Cosby argues that local generalizing prevents a rural constituency from forming because of competing perceptions of what rural really is. Falk's (Falk and Pinhey, 1978) suggestion that this word carries many meanings for a great number of different people also supports Cosby's idea.

Reed adds another dimension to this observation (1974:90):

> Southerners continue to see themselves as others see them, as *different*—and, in some ways, they are different. . . . If their culture serves southerners, for better or worse, in dealing with a hostile "outside," it will probably continue to serve so long as the outside seems to be hostile. The traditional outside has been the North. . . .

One can argue that the South's under-developed status keeps it from competing with other regions effectively. But how does such a process work? Reed (1986:6) asserts that social reward-and-punishment systems work through social types. The ones for the South—several of which Cosby and Charner (1978) have pointed out—are images that people use to "organize and deal with the reality they encounter. It lets them sort people out and pigeonhole them; it lets them believe they know what to expect from others. And because it is a *shared* image, it helps people communicate with one another. . . ."

Unfortunately, these cultural perceptions short-circuit the potential of southerners. Just as social and cultural definitions of traditional gender roles restrict women, so do the labels attached

to these "social types" limit southerners. Reed has elaborated this process eloquently:

> Once people are labeled, they find themselves being rewarded in various ways for behaving as the label demands, or being punished for falling short. People who have been well brought up may evaluate their own performances, and reward and punish themselves. In the extreme case, the role associated with a social type can become part of an individual's identity, part of his sense of *who he is*. And this can be true whether the label is a generally admired one or not. I suppose that few would object to someone's thinking of himself as a gentleman and trying to act like one, but what about someone who has been told he is a redneck, and believes it? . . . We make our character, but we must make it out of the material at hand (1986:6-7).

Why do labels attached to social types persist, especially when they clearly belong to regional mythology? It may be that the mass media propagates them because the market forces which guide, even dictate, television's form and content rely on the "shorthand" that social types provide.[4] Mass media can influence viewers without their even being aware of it. For southerners, the labels are pervasive:

> The media play a large part in defining the menu of available social types, and in teaching us what they look like. They introduce new types, and they propagate old ones as well. . . . What the media have done is to ensure that the southern gentleman, the belle, [and] the good old boy are nationally advertised southern types, known and accepted everywhere. More than that: the media have made these types into roles . . . that many know the lines for and can choose to play, so long as they meet the brute demographic requirements (Reed, 1986:9-12).

These labels place many southern, rural youth at a distinct disadvantage in how they look at themselves, define who they are, make choices about life, and form "world views" of significant others who will influence their lives. These youth are indeed rewarded socially and culturally by playing roles defined as appropriate by others. But economically, such regional social typing extracts a heavy toll on the rural South.

In addition to divisions engendered by myths, there is an increasing divergence between the urban and rural South. Alerting us to "growing shadows in the sunbelt," Governor William Winter (1986) has described two Souths fractured by separate rural and urban patterns of development. The State of Georgia offers a prime example. Many argue that there are now two Georgias, one dominated by Atlanta and the other by the declining counties. As Atlanta continues to grow and her economy booms, the social and economic situation in central and southern Georgia's rural areas deteriorates. The difference between Atlanta's success and the rural areas' decline is exacerbated by rural youth's out-migration to metropolitan areas. This migration not only deprives rural areas of much-needed human capital, but also removes the work force necessary to stimulate the growth of service industries in rural locales.[5]

Southern policymakers are often aware of these cultural forces and patterns of social organization, but that does not make them easy to change. And this is crucial because the South must change if it is to alter the tide of socioeconomic history, especially in the midst of an expensive and critical education reform movement (see Howell, 1988). The head of the principal "think tank" in the region, Jess White, Executive Director of the Southern Growth Policies Board, recently argued that the South must recognize that it needs to embrace interdependence: "We must understand that the good life of one individual is connected to the good life of another individual. . . [we] must thrust aside our historical reluctance to change" (Watkins, 1987:3B). Governor Winter adds, "For too long in the South, we have prided ourselves on a kind of rugged independence. . . . We must now learn to live in interdependen[ce]" (Watkins, 1987:3B).

Elements of Change in the New South

These are important insights into the social fabric of the South, but it remains to be seen whether they will help southerners cultivate the kind of interdependence and economic competitiveness they need. To make such a transformation

successfully, local institutions must be robust enough to adapt to regional forces while competing economically with similar institutions in other regions. Such a transformation requires many changes:

- Southerners need to take charge of their future through creative leadership. This means rejecting many of the labels imposed upon the South. This requires rejecting pejorative labels, casting aside myths, and forging the most vibrant parts of the region into a cache of cultural "capital." For instance, the creation of the Cable News Network (CNN), based in Atlanta, is one of the most significant elements of southern social and cultural change since the invention of the air conditioner. CNN is important not only in helping to change images of the region, but also in controlling the *mechanism* of image-making (i.e., the means of cultural production).

- The South must decentralize, using *interdependence* as a central process of operation. Instead of trying to clone Atlanta, Dallas, and Miami, the South should bank on the kind of decentralized development typical of North Carolina (Raleigh-Durham-Research Triangle Park) and northern Alabama (Birmingham-Huntsville). The region must be conscious of its own socioeconomic development and recognize how regional attributes can complement rather than compete with one another. The collective quest for the "Superconducting Super Collider" particle physics testing site scheduled to be awarded by the United States Department of Energy (DOE) exemplifies this kind of team work. Recognizing that it would be in the South's interest for this site to be located anywhere in the region, cooperative liaisons among some southern States emerged in the early stages of proposal development. [Note: In November, 1988, DOE designated Waxahachie, Texas, as the "preferred" site.—*Ed.*]

- The South must get on top of new information and technology systems. The so-called microcomputer revolution has already spawned a few "nodes" in the South—at Norcross, Georgia; Research Triangle Park, North Carolina; and the mid-cities area between Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas. The new set of technologies embraces a decentralized pattern of social organization which is potentially compatible with extant trends in the South. Although educational systems cannot be reformed overnight, it is possible that pockets of expertise can continue to emerge and grow within the region. The main problem is the talent drain whereby young people with potential in high technology tend to leave the South.

- Many of these societal changes—especially ones involving technology—offer an *opportunity* to make changes in the South. Creative, visionary leadership will be necessary to make interdependence popular and workable, but this change is vital if the social institutions in the South are to adapt to the demands placed on them.

Final Thoughts on Rural Youth and Rural Education

In the first part of this paper, I note that rural youth are not homogeneous. Moreover, these young people are clearly influenced by the mass youth culture, facilitated by the electronic media, and by easy access to mass transportation. We sorely need to update what we know about rural youth—especially since the rural economy and other social institutions that shape them have changed dramatically over the last decade.

Is this a call for an expensive new research study on rural youth? Although such a study would be important, using existing data offers a valid means of addressing rural issues quickly and economically. No database covering rural youth is as comprehensive and as long-standing as the *Monitoring the Future* survey conducted by the University of Michigan for the National Institute on Drug Abuse. It is not just a drug usage survey, but a comprehensive social indicators survey conducted annually since 1975 on a representative cross-section of U.S. high school seniors. There are about 17,000 seniors surveyed on the following topics (see Johnston *et al.*, 1986:6):

Drugs	Major social institutions
Education	Military
Work and leisure	Interpersonal relationships
Sex roles and family	Race relations
Population concerns	Concerns for others
Conservation, materialism, equity	Happiness
Religion	Other personality variables
Politics	Background
Social change	Deviant behavior and victimization
Social problems	Health habits and symptoms

Since the database has fairly good measurement of residential background, distinguishing between "farm" and "nonmetropolitan," it can differentiate among rural groups as effectively as possible in a respondent-based questionnaire item. Containing well over a decade's worth of data from this important period of change in the United States, *Monitoring the Future* appears to offer the potential for a comprehensive examination of the characteristics of rural youth on which any serious effort at rural education reform must be based.

The best and most fundamental means of helping rural youth is not to try to "fix" them (i.e., blaming the victim) but to repair the organization of institutions which result in the problems faced by rural youth. This challenges the ideologies of some of the most committed educators since it addresses social institutions instead of individuals. The belief underlying this position is that interventions which successfully repair institutions and institutional relationships will have longer-lasting effects than those directed solely at individuals.

The recent report from the Council for Educational Development and Research (CEDaR), *Building on Excellence: Regional Priorities for the Improvement of Rural, Small Schools*, presents the results of a survey of some 9,300 rural and small school officials and teachers across the Nation concerning the needs of their schools. The chief finding is that rural educators are primarily concerned about improving students' thinking and reasoning skills, as well as the overall performance of children from low-income families. According to school personnel, the CEDaR study finds the southern, Appalachian, rural, and small schools most in need of improvement. Other areas of the country vary in how they perceive needs, but the South's perception is unequivocal.

The economy of the rural South, rural education, and rural youth are interconnected. The transition from manufacturing and agriculture toward service and information-driven industries will demand an increasingly talented work force. Insufficient talent in the labor pool will discourage newer industries with quality jobs from investing in regional economy (see Johnson and Scurlock, 1986). The lack of good jobs will, in turn, contribute to the traditional talent drain, with youth abandoning the rural South for urban areas. This further diminishes the level of talent in the work force and decreases the quality of leadership available in those communities. This brain drain creates teacher shortages and deprives rural schools of math and science teachers who see little point in accepting low pay in rural education when they can garner larger salaries in urban businesses.

How can we change this scenario? There is no obvious antidote, but some things seem clear. Focusing on individuals (e.g., rural youth) without changing the social structure (e.g., rural schools and communities) will surely not cause significant positive changes. Rural education reform involves more than schools and education. In many cases, it is virtually impossible to finance educational reform without changing school district funding formulas, but it is difficult to change these funding formulas without first changing tax structures and the business climate. A blend of interventions based on an understanding of rural education, rural political economies, and rural youth seems more promising. We need to base these interventions less on urban models of change, driven by rural policymaking in an urban context, than on new perspectives freed from the myths and cultural imperialism that have characterized previous movements of educational reform.

End Notes

[1]We were unable to find a similar profile of rural youth using 1980 Census data that would update Jiminez (1974). We believe that this lack supports our contention that such work is undervalued by the education research establishment.

[2]One reviewer commented that there is positive stereotyping about rural life, as well, such as that exemplified by Norman Rockwell paintings. Our impression is that these "positive" stereotypes tend to not depict rural life in the South, but that found in other regions of the country, e.g., New England, the Midwest.

[3]The line of research perhaps justified a certain image of rural people held by mass society and social scientists. The fact that many times rural people did not describe themselves as "deprived," whereas level-of-living surveys concluded that by objective standards they were, gets into the "definition of the situation" (see also Bluhm, 1975). To argue for absolute cultural level-of-living standards is ethnocentric. However, the possession of "middle-class" artifacts can indeed influence families and households. See, for instance, Fitchen (1981) for an ethnographic portrayal of rural impoverishment in the United States.

[4]Tindall (1976) says that such social types even penetrate "third-rate" elements of literature. Reed argues that it is *especially* third-rate literature, motion pictures, television, and popular music that help one to understand them (1986).

[5]My own research with Wolfgang Frese (Howell and Frese, 1983) confirms this trend, showing the most important move for rural youth is the one just after high school—toward more urban settings.

NOTE: I wish to express thanks to Arthur G. Cosby and T. David Mason for their suggestions and advice in the preparation and revision of this paper. It reflects many conversations with these individuals and others. Any errors of fact or interpretation, however, are my own. The writing of this essay was supported in part, by the Department of Sociology and Antrhopology and the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University.

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Section II

Rural Education: Problems and Issues

Demographic Trends Relevant to Education in Nonmetropolitan America

David L. Brown

David Brown, a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Wisconsin and a demographic researcher, is a professor of rural sociology and associate director of research at Cornell University's College of Agriculture. He recently served as an administrator in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and in that capacity chaired the steering committee to oversee a Congressionally mandated study to propose policies to strengthen economic development in rural areas.

Although our Nation's population is overwhelmingly metropolitan, about one-quarter of our citizens (more than 56 million) live in nonmetropolitan areas, spread across 2,400 of America's 3,100 counties. Accordingly, "nonmetropolitan" issues directly concern a substantial part of our population in nearly all regions of the country.

This paper describes demographic and socioeconomic conditions and changes in rural communities from the 1970s through the first part of the 1980s. These changes, in turn, provide the context in which rural educational programs operate. In assessing the need for continued public programs to nonmetropolitan areas, it is vital to consider these conditions and to recognize the differences between urban and rural contexts. These differences provide the principal justification for separate (or separately administered) metropolitan and nonmetropolitan policies. The changes in the diverse conditions of rural areas also provide a rationale for targeting assistance to areas of greatest need and/or opportunity.

Today's nonmetropolitan America bears little resemblance to the rural America of the 1950s. (The terms rural and nonmetropolitan are used interchangeably in this paper.) The size of the population, its growth and composition, the industrial and occupational structure of the economy, the general level of socioeconomic well-being, and perhaps most important of all, the links tying urban and rural communities and their economies together have all changed significantly during this period.

Compared with three decades ago, socioeconomic conditions in nonmetropolitan America have generally improved. Nevertheless, nonmetropolitan economic conditions worsened significantly after 1980. If rural revitalization was the theme of the '70s, economic stress is the issue of the '80s. This stress is associated with both cyclical trends, such as slow recovery from the 1979–82 recession, and with basic changes in the structure of the nonmetropolitan

economy. Very slow growth in manufacturing employment negatively affected many rural economies, for example, those experiencing greater competition from imports and increased labor productivity resulting from technological change.

These cyclical and structural changes affect, and are affected by, the workforce in rural economies where the interplay of sociodemographic change and educational policies is clearest. The changing size and composition of the nonmetropolitan population both determines and results from economic conditions. In what follows, we describe these trends and changes in the rural population, discuss their causes, and analyze their consequences.

Reduced Nonmetropolitan Population Growth and Migration

In the 1970s, the relative rates of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan population growth reversed; net migration also turned around—large numbers left metropolitan areas in favor of rural locations. This turnaround was one of the most surprising and significant demographic events of the decade. For the decade as a whole, the annualized nonmetropolitan growth rate was 13.5 per 1,000 compared with 10.1 per 1,000 for metropolitan areas (table 1). The rate of nonmetropolitan population growth increased in all four census regions, with the nonmetropolitan rate exceeding that of metropolitan areas, except in the South. Moreover, nonmetropolitan growth increased in areas separated from direct metropolitan contact, as well as in counties adjacent to metropolitan areas.

Table 1.—Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan annualized population change, 1960–85

Area	1960–70	1970–80	1980–85
	Population growth per 1,000 per year		
United States	12.7	10.9	10.5
Metropolitan*	16.1	10.1	11.5
Nonmetropolitan	2.5	13.5	7.4

*Metropolitan Areas as defined in 1970.
Source: Fuguitt, 1985; U.S. Bureau of the Census, unpublished data, 1985.

Smaller areas grew more rapidly than larger ones, indicating decentralization in rural areas. Research conducted during the '70s clearly suggested that both economic and noneconomic factors motivated this nonmetropolitan population revival (Fuguitt, 1985). An increasingly diversified and revitalized nonmetropolitan economy, community modernization, and deeply held preferences for rural living all spurred the migration reversal.

By the end of the '70s, nonmetropolitan growth began to slow (Richter, 1985). Post-1980 population estimates for counties indicate that nonmetropolitan areas are now once again growing at a lower rate than metropolitan areas. The data suggest that the annual growth rate for nonmetropolitan counties declined to 7.4 per 1,000 in 1980–85. In contrast, the metropolitan rate increased slightly to 11.5 per 1,000 during the period.

Although nonmetropolitan growth slackened during the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was no net outmigration until 1982–83. However, current data show a nonmetropolitan net migration loss to metropolitan statistical areas (MSA) of about 632,000 persons between 1985 and 1986 (table 2).

Table 2.—Metropolitan–Nonmetropolitan migration in the United States, 1980 to 1986

Migration stream	1980–81	1981–82	1982–83	1983–84	1985–86
Metro-to-nonmetro	2,350	2,366	2,066	2,258	1,807
Nonmetro-to-metro	2,156	2,217	2,088	2,609	2,439
Net-to-nonmetro	194	149	−22	−351	−632

Note: For 1980–83, metropolitan areas are as defined in 1970; 1984 metropolitan definition used thereafter (noninstitutionalized population).
Source: Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census; Prepared by the Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The reduced nonmetropolitan growth of the 1980s may signal a return to the general decline of previous decades. Almost half of all nonmetropolitan counties (1,160) lost population between 1983 and 1985, whereas only 460 did in the 1970s—compared to 1,300 in the 1960s. The decline of the nonmetropolitan population, while still concentrated in the Plains and western Corn Belt, also spread

to the lower Great Lakes and to part of the South (Appalachia, Delta, Texas plains) during 1980–85 (Economic Research Service). The declining areas have experienced lower rates of decline than those they suffered in the 1950s and 1960s, but the most recent rural losses are a significant departure from the growth of the previous decade.

Slower nonmetropolitan growth poses important questions about future rural economic progress, community viability, and the need for essential services—including education. Contributing to this reduced growth were delayed recovery from the 1979–82 recession, financial stress in agriculture and its linked industries, the slow growth or decline of nonmetropolitan manufacturing and natural resource-based industries, and the diminished appeal of living in rural areas. While it is impossible to discuss all of these issues in this paper, the brief analysis below of economic and demographic developments suggests the nature of rural structural difficulties during the 1980s.

Slow Recovery from the 1979–82 Recession

Before the 1970s, rural unemployment rates were lower than those in metropolitan areas—even during periods of recession and recovery. The most recent recession, however, significantly broke that pattern. The rural unemployment rate rose more rapidly than its metropolitan counterpart, peaked at a higher level in 1980 and has remained above the metropolitan rate (table 3). Employment in timber industries fell as new housing starts declined. Rural manufacturing plants, linked to the struggling auto and steel industries were hard hit by their losses. The decline of mining and other energy-extractive industries also took its toll from the rural economy. The textile, clothing, and leather goods industries which are concentrated in nonmetropolitan areas, also suffered from increased competition from imports. In addition, involuntarily shortened work weeks affected rural workers more than urban workers. Not surprisingly, more rural job-seekers became discouraged than metropolitan job-hunters and dropped out of the labor force altogether. The shortened work week and the greater discouragement among rural job-seekers caused a more pronounced underestimate of the unemployment rate in nonmetropolitan locales than in metropolitan areas (as shown in table 3 where the adjusted rates take these phenomena into account).

Table 3.—Nonmetropolitan and metropolitan unemployment rates, 1973 to 1986

	Average annual unemployment rate			
	Nonmetropolitan		Metropolitan[1]	
Year	Reported	Adjusted[2]	Reported	Adjusted[2]
	Percent			
1986	8.3	12.8	6.6	9.5
1985	8.4	13.0	6.9	9.9
1984	8.1	12.2	7.3	10.4
1983	10.1	14.9	9.4	13.1
1982	10.1	14.9	9.5	13.1
1981	7.9	11.5	7.5	10.3
1980	7.3	10.7	7.0	9.5
1979	5.7	8.5	5.8	8.0
1978	5.8	8.8	6.1	8.4
1977	6.6	9.8	7.3	9.3
1976	7.0	10.2	8.0	10.6
1975	8.0	11.6	8.7	11.5
1974	5.1	7.9	5.8	7.9
1973	4.4	7.1	5.1	7.1

[1] Metropolitan area delineation was updated in 1985 and is not directly comparable with earlier years in data series.

[2] Unemployment rate adjusted to include discouraged workers and half of the workers employed part time for economic reasons.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics. Adjusted rates prepared by Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Rural areas have recovered from the recession less rapidly than their metropolitan counterparts. In fact, nonmetropolitan unemployment actually rose between 1984 and 1985, while the metropolitan rate declined. As of 1986, the official nonmetropolitan unemployment rate remained 1.7 percentage points above the metropolitan rate (with a 3.3 percentage point difference in the adjusted rates). The poor performance of the nonmetropolitan

manufacturing sector (which has regained only 20,000 of the 450,000 jobs it lost during the recession) explains most of this difference.

Improved performance in this sector seems to hold the key to future development in many other areas. Such improvement, however, may require a transition to a post-industrial, service-producing economy, or may demand capturing a mix of manufacturing activities different from the one that fueled rural growth in the '60s and '70s.

Changes in Population Composition

Decisionmakers, including educators, are more and more aware that information on demographic composition, in addition to that on population size and change, is essential in planning for the future. Age composition, household structure, and educational attainment are particularly relevant to nonmetropolitan educational policy.

Age Composition: In 1987, the estimated median age of the United States population was 32, a decade older than in 1880. In that year, youth and infants comprised 44 percent of the Nation's population, whereas elderly persons accounted for only 3 percent. Today, the number of infants and youth has declined to less than 30 percent, while more than one in ten Americans is 65 years old or older. These changes naturally influence the demand for formal education.

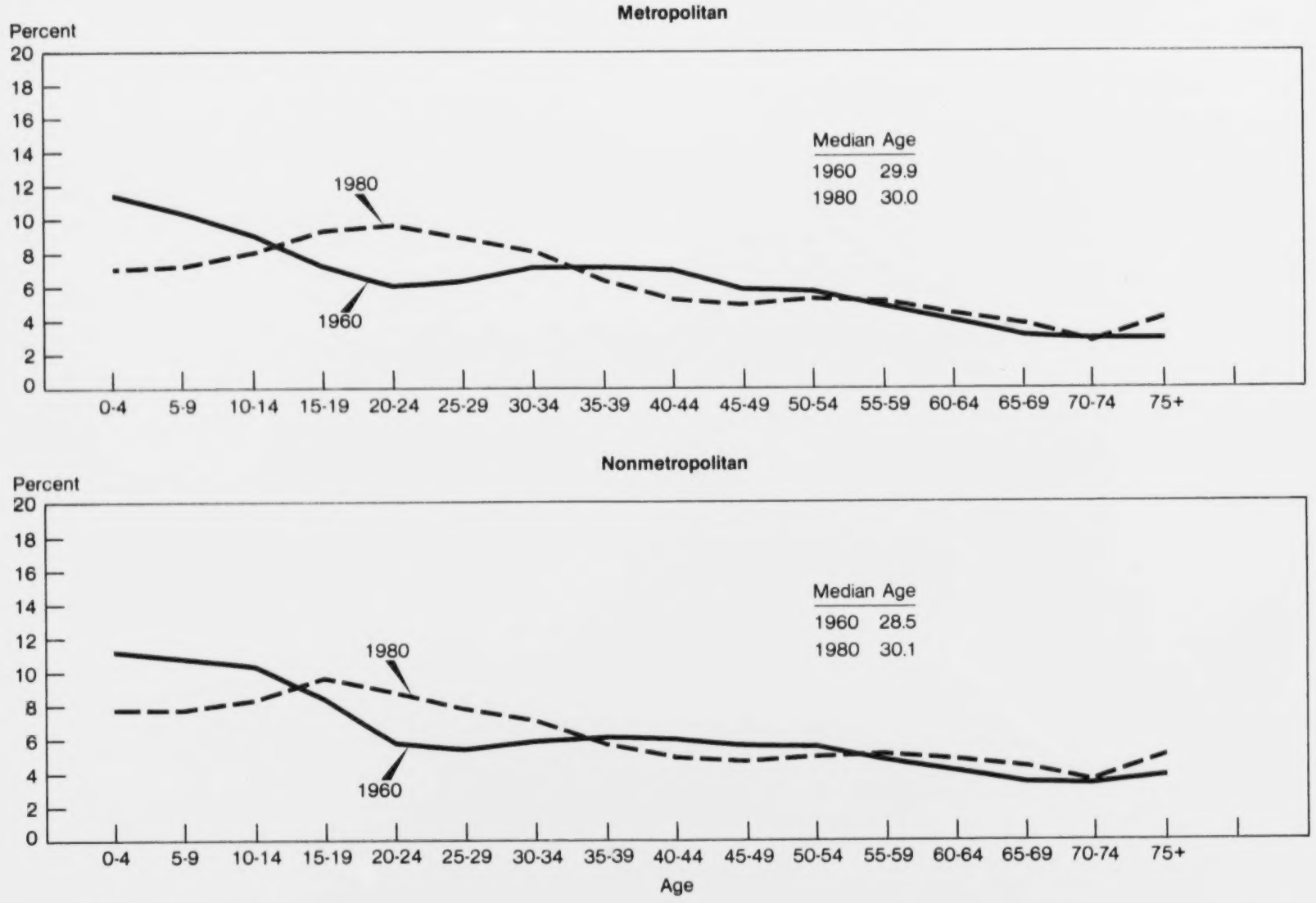
Rural areas have traditionally had a higher proportion of children, relatively fewer younger adults and middle-aged persons, and larger proportions of elderly people. These residential differences seem to stem from higher numbers of births in rural areas, the departure of young adults, and a combination of elderly people moving into or choosing to remain in rural areas. Although both urban and rural areas have been similarly affected by major demographic events of the last quarter century, residential differences in age composition remain. The data in figure 1 show that the decline since 1960 in the proportion of the population under 15 years of age is pronounced in both residential categories, and results from the current prolonged period of low birth rates. These data suggest there will be less need for primary and secondary education, but that demand for elderly-related services will grow.

Nonetheless, in 1980, the rural population still had a larger proportion of infants and children than its metropolitan counterpart (figure 2). Accordingly, nonmetropolitan areas have a proportionately greater need for elementary and secondary education. Despite this, the rural population also appears to have aged more than the urban one because many elderly people remain in nonmetropolition areas and many others move to rural areas from metropolitan counties. The working-age population grew somewhat more rapidly in metropolitan areas for two reasons: the baby boom was more dramatic there and urban areas are still gaining young workers through migration from the rural population and from abroad.

Projections prepared by the Census Bureau indicate that the Nation's population will be getting proportionately much older in both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. In 2030, the proportion of the population under 65 will have virtually stopped growing, while beginning in 2010, the number of those 65 and older will increase sharply. The aging of the baby boom generation (born between 1946 and 1964) will push the median age to about 41 in 2030 (compared with 32 in 1987). In that year, 21 percent of the population will be 65 or older and 3 percent will be 85 or older. Relatively small changes in the sizes of younger age groups, combined with substantial increases in the elderly population, will yield equal numbers of the very young and old (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984). These changes will have far-ranging economic implications. They will dictate the need and demand for goods, services (including education), and economic opportunities. These changes will also affect patterns of consumption and lifestyle, as well as social and political behavior. The proportionate demand for education will decrease and the need for services for the elderly will grow.

Household Composition: Changes in household structure are critically important for predicting what services the local community will need. U.S. Census data demonstrate that more

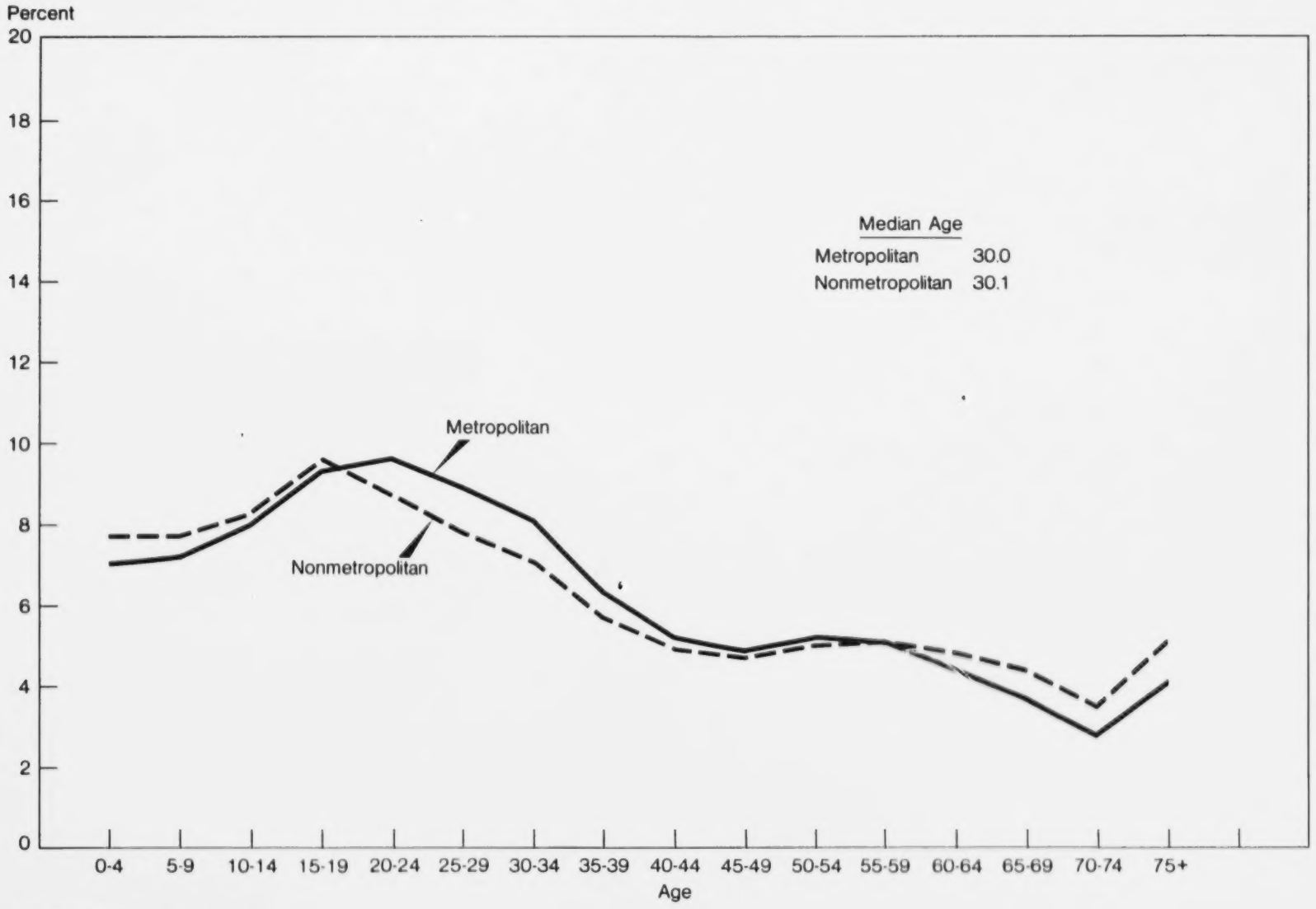
Figure 1.—Age distribution of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan populations, 1960 and 1980



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Note: Metropolitan as of 1980 Census definition.

Figure 2.—Age distribution of the metropolitan and nonmetropolitan populations, 1980



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

traditional family living arrangements (Fuguitt et al., forthcoming 1989) continue to characterize nonmetropolitan areas. They have a higher proportion of married-couple households with minor children, a smaller proportion of single-parent families, and a much lower proportion of people living alone. On the other hand, both rural and urban areas experienced similar changes in family living arrangements during the 1970s. This is because some of the main factors associated with metropolitan-nonmetropolitan differences in family structure have diminished: number of childbirths, age at marriage, conservative attitudes toward the family, and the role of women.

These changes suggest that residential differences in family structure will moderate as well. The implications of these changes are far-reaching. For example, when the number of single-parent, mostly female-maintained households with children increases in an area, it implies possible increases in the need for public assistance. Day care, income maintenance, and special educational programs often become increasingly necessary. Yet, even in an era characterized by less childbearing and an aging population, nonmetropolitan households continue to have a more traditional structure. This contributes to their somewhat higher fertility and a proportionately higher demand for education than is true in metropolitan areas.

Educational Attainment: A high quality workforce is critical to rural economic development. New cohorts entering the workforce must be properly prepared, current workers must maintain their employability, and displaced ones must be provided with skills to help them get new jobs. The data (figure 3) show that in recent years amounts of formal education have increased substantially in both metropolitan and rural areas. The metropolitan median education level increased from 11.1 to 12.6 years between 1960 and 1980, while the nonmetropolitan median increased from 9.3 to 12.3 years. The seeming convergence in these medians masks differences in educational attainment between the residence categories, however.

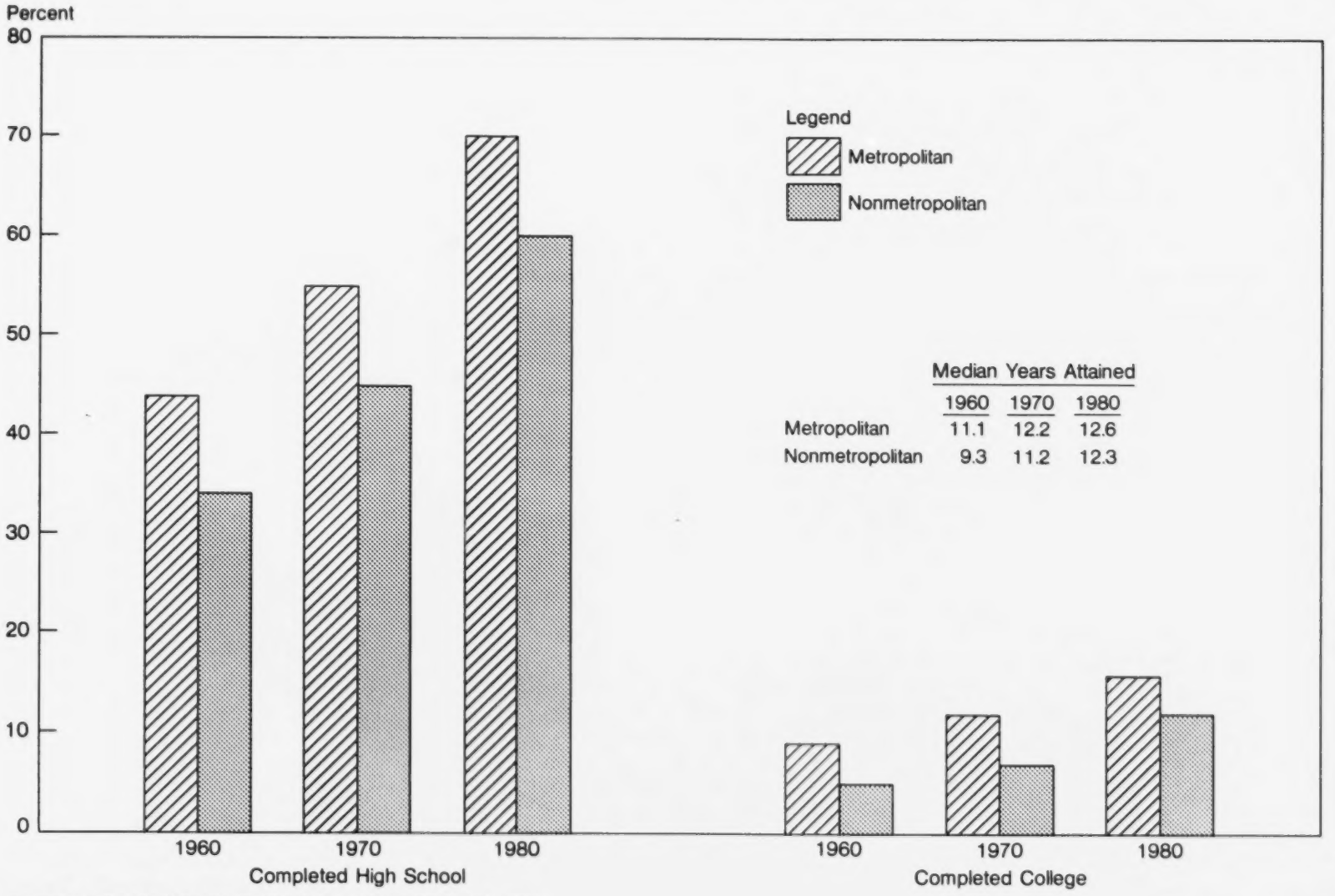
Continuing and even growing residential differences in formal educational attainment emerge when one focuses on *completion* of high school and college rather than on median years completed. In both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas, the proportion of the population 25 and over that completed high school has risen substantially since 1960. The gap between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan levels of educational attainment, however, has remained at about 10 percentage points. The percentage of the population 25 and older that completed college has also increased in both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas since 1960, but the gap in rural versus metropolitan college completion has actually increased. The proportion of the adult rural population that completed college in 1980 is about the same as the metropolitan percentage a decade before—about one in 10. The difference results partly from rural adults with college degrees migrating to urban areas (even during the 1970s turnaround era). These residential differences are even more marked for racial minorities.

Job upgrading and lifetime learning are new economic concepts, not easily measured in conventional data. We do not know to what extent workers upgrade their skills to maintain employability in the rapidly changing economy. Many firms believe that society—not individual firms—should bear the cost of this upgrading (Kuttner, 1987). During periods of rapid technological and/or organizational change, it is unlikely that most firms will provide adequate training to help their workers maintain their occupational levels without some kind of government subsidy. This is a critical issue for displaced workers, for those trying to maintain jobs, and for those who risk losing income and status.

Changing Dimensions of Rural Poverty

Throughout this century, a disproportionate share of the Nation's poor has resided in nonmetropolitan areas. The latest data available from the Current Population Survey indicate that this situation persists today. In 1985, the poverty rate of the nonmetropolitan population was 18.3 percent compared with 12.7 percent for their metropolitan counterparts (figure 4). Even when in-kind transfers are included with other income, 13.2 percent of the rural populace had insufficient income to meet minimal basic needs—the official definition of poverty. In metropolitan areas, the comparable figure was 9.3 percent. Although poverty rates

Figure 3.—Educational attainment by metropolitan residence, 1960, 1970, and 1980 (population 25 and above)



Source: U.S. Census of Population, tabulated in McGranahan, et al., 1986.

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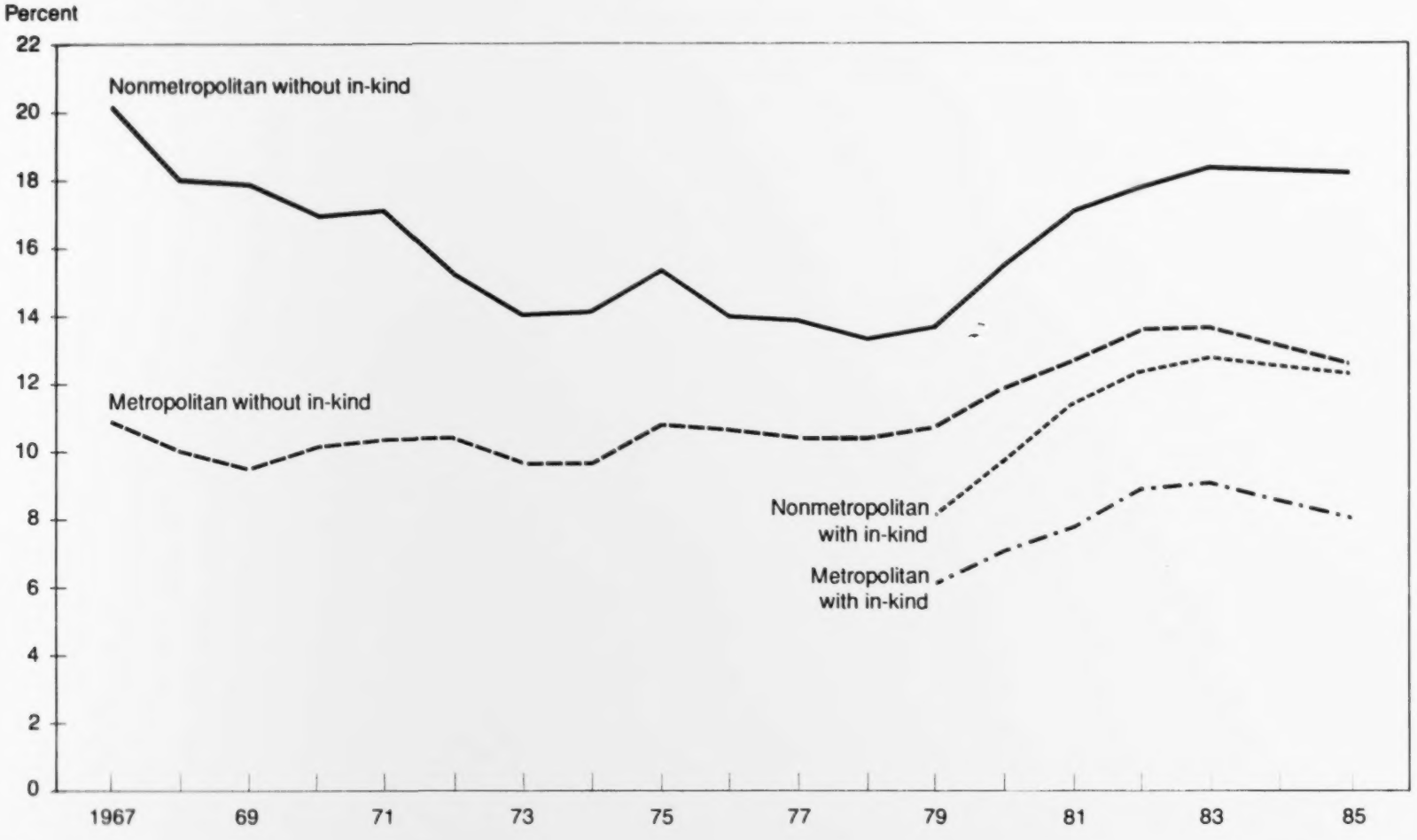
Figure 4.—Poverty rates, 1967–85 (with and without in-kind benefits)



Metropolitan and nonmetropolitan based on the 1980 Census for 1985, on the 1970 Census for 1969 and 1971-83, and on the 1960 Census for earlier years. No 1984 data.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

declined during the mid-1970s, both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan rates have risen since the 1979–82 recession, and were substantially higher in 1985 than a decade before (Deavers, et al. 1987).

Poverty is more prevalent in nonmetropolitan areas, and the characteristics of the poor differ from those of their urban counterparts. The rural poor are more likely to be elderly, white, and to live in the South than the metropolitan poor. Members of poor nonmetropolitan families are much more likely to be working. More than two-thirds of the nonmetropolitan poor families had at least one worker in 1985, and more than one-fourth had at least two workers. In metropolitan areas, on the other hand, only 58 percent of poor families had even one worker.

During the last decade, the composition of the poor has also changed. Some of these changes further differentiate between the rural and urban poor, but most have affected both types of areas alike (table 4). Changes in the age and family composition, and regional location of poverty are especially notable. Since 1973, the poverty rate among older persons has declined from 16 to 14 percent, while that of youths increased from 14 to 22 percent. Both areas experienced this reversal. In rural areas, poverty among the elderly fell from 23 to 18 percent, whereas the rate for youth rose from 17 to 24 percent. Two important reasons for the improved economic position of older people are the initiation of the Supplemental Security Income program (which established a national minimum benefit level for needy elderly, disabled and blind people) and the indexing of social security for inflation beginning in 1974.

The overall improvement in the economic position of the elderly masks important differences among subgroups of the aged population. As a total group, the elderly have gained in average income because new cohorts entering the older age groups are more affluent than their predecessors. The income of the oldest elderly however, has declined. The oldest in the population (those 80 and over) are disproportionately located in rural areas, where they earn only three-quarters of their metropolitan counterparts' income (Glasgow, 1988). Thus, the economic status of the rural elderly continues to be an important social issue.

Changes in household and family structure, and especially the increase in female-headed, single-parent families, have worsened children's economic position. The greatest share of the Nation's poor (45 percent) live in families headed by married couples, but more than one-third live in families headed by a female. The poverty rate for these households is substantially higher than for other types of families. This is the case in both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan locations, but is especially true in rural areas where 43 percent of female-maintained families live in poverty, compared with 13 percent of other households. Fifty-eight percent of nonmetropolitan children living in female-headed families are poor—compared with 18 percent of children living in other family types. The child poverty rate has increased across the board since 1973.

Implications for Education

Educational policy cannot be separated from its sociodemographic context. Changes in the number and kinds of people living in various areas affect the need and demand for educational services. This paper has demonstrated that rural America has been slow to recover from the recession of 1979–82, and that nonmetropolitan areas dependent on agriculture, mining, and other industries based on natural resources are experiencing severe economic stress in the 1980s (especially compared with boom conditions of the previous decade). Manufacturing growth in rural areas has also been very sluggish during the '80s. All of these conditions contrast sharply with the rural revitalization of the 1970s. The sizeable increase in population and employment in the 1970s has reverted to slow growth, with large numbers leaving rural areas in the 1980s. Accordingly, educational policymakers should plan for sluggish national growth or decline in the demand for traditional elementary and secondary educational services. There is wide local diversity in growth, however, as always.

Although the size of the nonmetropolitan population is stagnant or declining, its composition is changing in ways that will reduce demand for conventional educational services. The population is aging: by the year 2030, there will be as many elderly people as school-age children. Rural areas have proportionately more youth

Table 4.—Selected characteristics of the poor, by metropolitan and nonmetropolitan residence, 1973 and 1983*

Item	U.S.		Metropolitan		Nonmetropolitan	
	1973	1983	1973	1983	1973	1983
Poverty rate for:						
Total population	11.1	15.2	9.7	13.8	14.0	18.3
Children in households with female householders, no spouse present	52.1	55.4	51.8	54.5	52.9	58.0
Blacks	31.4	35.7	28.2	33.4	41.1	43.4
Aged	16.3	14.1	12.7	12.1	22.5	17.8
Farmers	13.4	23.7	NA	NA	NA	NA
Percentage of poor who are:						
Children in households with female householders, no spouse present	22.5	19.0	27.7	22.1	14.8	14.8
Whites	65.9	68.0	61.4	63.3	72.6	75.5
Blacks	32.2	28.0	36.3	32.3	25.9	21.2
Aged	14.6	10.5	12.1	9.3	18.4	12.4
Farmers	5.6	3.7	NA	NA	NA	NA
Householders working full time	18.3	16.9	15.5	12.9	22.2	23.3
Percentage of poor families with:						
No workers	38.1	40.5	42.4	46.1	32.1	31.8
Two or more workers	20.0	20.7	15.7	15.4	26.1	28.9

NA = not available

* Metropolitan areas as defined in 1970.

Source: Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

than urban ones, but the overall aging of the population will affect both areas alike, cutting demand for elementary and secondary education.

The industrial transformation of rural economies and associated worker dislocation will increase the need to retrain workers and assist employees. In fact, the mix of needed educational services will undoubtedly change in the decades to come. Formal classroom education will decline as the need for continuing education and worker retraining grows. The pace of industrial transformation will probably increase in the future. Workers can no longer expect to apply the same skills throughout their professional lives. Continual retraining will be necessary if workers are to avoid downward mobility. Accordingly, nonmetropolitan communities might consider redirecting some of their resources from traditional formal education to continuing education, job retraining, and lifetime learning programs.

Rural areas, as well as the whole country, face changing demands for educational services. On the one hand, changes in the size of the population and its age composition are diminishing the demand for traditional services. On the other hand, industrial restructuring and associated worker dislocations are increasing the demand for less conventional educational and training programs. In nonmetropolitan areas, the situation is exacerbated by lower than average personal and household income and recessionary conditions in industries that produce natural resource-based goods. Consequently, many rural communities find it increasingly difficult to fund the needed services. Federal assistance, through the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), provides some assistance, but the current economic conditions strain rural communities' fiscal resources. The smaller size, more dispersed settlement, and greater geographic isolation of nonmetropolitan communities often prevent possible cost-saving economies of scale and contribute to higher per-pupil costs for educational services.

The quality of personnel in a local economy is related to how successfully it maintains a highly competitive economic environment. To be competitive, rural areas must provide educational services to new workers, current employees who want to maintain their skills, workers trying to adapt to changing industrial processes, and dislocated workers. Consulting and analyzing relevant data on the changing size and composition of the population can help policymakers plan the appropriate mix of these services. It is crucial that these data also be available for small geographic areas, since the diversity of nonmetropolitan conditions mediates against "one size fits all" type policies.

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An Alternative to the Traditional Funding of Small, Rural Schools

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There are good reasons to expect major changes in the financing of small, rural schools in the near future. States are imposing new curricular requirements, particularly for secondary schools; they are relying more on categorical rather than general forms of aid for education; and the form and level of the Federal government's commitment to education is changing. The rural economy is in flux; educational technology is developing rapidly; and there appears to be new thinking about the wisdom of consolidating or merging small, rural school districts. All these changes will affect how small, rural schools will be financed.

This paper, which is divided into three sections, gives an overview of policy issues that need to be considered as these changes take place. The first section describes the traditional approach to financing rural schools and its inherent difficulties. The second introduces a competing "new-view," replete with its own serious, but different problems. The final part discusses the differences between the two and speculates about future developments. Although each approach is flawed, it would be a mistake to assume that the new view is necessarily better than the old one. In fact, the differences between them are striking and instructive, but until some of the inherent difficulties that affect both are resolved, it is impossible to decide which is superior. Since the "new" approach is likely to be increasingly evident in years to come, it is important to be aware of its shortcomings and equally important not to think that the hard work of crafting a coherent fiscal policy for small, rural schools has already been accomplished.

The Traditional Approach

Traditional policy depends heavily on the idea that it costs more to do the same thing in a smaller school or district than in a larger one. For many years this idea has dominated policymaking on

small, rural schools. The logic is disarmingly simple. If small schools and districts are more costly to operate, why not simply turn them into larger ones and pocket the savings? According to this view, consolidating school districts often leads to greater efficiency and greater equity for students and taxpayers.

This kind of thinking results in the traditional rural school finance policy: encourage enlargement of school districts through some combination of mandates, fiscal incentives, and admonitions, while providing additional aid to those districts for whom reorganization is not a workable option.

This policy suffers from a serious, inherent difficulty. Additional aid (whether called a small scale adjustment, sparsity aid or isolation aid) undercuts the effort to create larger administrative units. This leads to an extensive, unfinished debate over eligibility standards in which both sides try to distinguish between school districts that are small by necessity rather than through choice.

There are two reasons that establishing eligibility standards as a means of solving this problem have failed. First, there is a lack of consensus regarding how to handle eligibility. Gerald Bass (1980) found that States use no fewer than 11 different criteria to decide which school districts are eligible for some form of small, rural school aid. Bass' list included criteria such as distance, travel time, population density, topographical features, and climate. Moreover, Lyle Wright (1981) reported large variations in what constituted eligibility even among those States utilizing the same broad criteria.

Second, political and social factors are conspicuously absent from the list, and yet, as recent research shows, such factors can influence the outcome of attempts to reorganize school districts (Monk and Haller, 1986; Peshkin, 1982). In a State where local autonomy regarding reorganization is important, a school district may be small because its neighbors refuse to join it. The State's emphasis on geographical barriers to reorganization may not be relevent to such an "unwanted" school district.

Another problem associated with the traditional approach involves dispositon of the extra financial burden associated with small size. A State that refuses to provide aid to a small district on the grounds that its small size is unneccessary puts fiscal pressure on the reluctant school district. The thinking seems to be that taxpayers will bear any burdens necessary to maintain the small school district. Moreover, policymakers seem to feel this is acceptable since the refusal to reorganize often arises from taxpayers. This reasoning is seriously flawed since the burden need not fall solely (or at all) on the shoulders of taxpayers. Students may bear the consequences of the State's refusal to offset the costs of small size. In such cases, the State, by refusing to provide additional aid, denies equal educational opportunities to students who happen to attend small schools supported by taxpayers who resist reorganization.

Finally, there can be problems with the steps States take to encourage reorganization. When financial incentives are used, the effects of additional State dollars are combined with the effects of the resulting reorganization. Many of the benefits commonly associated with reorganization (new facilities, expanded curricular offerings, and lower taxes) are at least partly attributable to whatever additional aid accompanies the reorganization. In these situations, one wonders what would have happened had the additional State aid arrived without the accompanying reorganization requirements.

The New Approach

The new approach questions the nature of economies in education based on size and takes seriously the claim that modern technologies are rapidly eroding size economies.[1]

The new view is that small, rural schools are not inherently inefficient; rather, they are different with unique needs to which States should attend. The new approach sidesteps the three greatest weaknesses of the traditional view: the need to distinguish between districts and schools that are small out of choice rather than necessity, shortchanging students as a by-product of attempts to encourage reorganization, and the problem of confusing the effects of mergers with those of additional State aid.

Although the new approach solves these problems, others arrive in their stead. If size economies really are as unimportant as the new approach suggests, on what grounds can special financing policies be justified? Since the existence of size economies has always been an important rationale for special State treatment of small, rural schools, advocates of the new view risk seriously undercutting their case for providing assistance to these schools when they question the importance of size economies.

Attempts have been made to resolve this problem by stressing that difficulties for small, rural schools derive from their rural status rather than from their small size. This represents a sharp departure from the past when it was sufficient to show that costs were higher in small, rural schools. In the traditional view, understanding why costs are higher is less important since these costs justify eliminating small administrative units. If, on the other hand, small units are likely to remain (as they are under the new view), it becomes more important to understand the sources of the extra costs these districts face, as well as the nature of the State's responsibility to them.

There are, however, difficulties associated with this new approach. Problems associated with schools' rural origins are not well understood and are often difficult to separate from their small size. For the new view to succeed, analysts must somehow show that these rural-based problems are substantial, remediable through State policy, and unrelated to small size. This is no trivial task.

The implications for State financial policy are also strikingly different under the new view. Historically, districts that receive State aid because of small size or their rural setting exercised considerable discretion over these funds. The new view emphasizes a more categorical approach to funding in which the State provides resources to resolve specific problems in given districts. These resources, which come with strings attached, are part of the trend among the States to hold districts more accountable for the funds they receive.

The new approach's emphasis on categorical funding has advantages as well as disadvantages. Although districts may lament the loss of autonomy over how they spend their funds, the categorical, problem-oriented nature of the new approach can help important political coalitions to form. This is true because problems that trouble small, rural districts are not necessarily unique to them. The new approach calls for providing relief wherever a given problem is found, regardless of the setting—rural, suburban, or urban. Thus, the new approach gives rural legislators common cause with suburban and urban representatives whose districts face similar problems.

Overview and Discussion

More coherent policies regarding small, rural schools depend upon resolving the contradictions that plague both the traditional and the new approach. Progress in both areas is discussed below along with suggestions for future work.

Progress and the Traditional Approach

By broadening requirements to include social and political factors (as well as more conventional geographic considerations), the traditional approach could better identify what necessarily counts as a small school. A State could, for example, allow districts to demonstrate their *individual* willingness to reorganize with neighboring districts by passing a referendum. Should a district pass such a referendum but subsequently fail to attract a willing partner, it would become eligible for additional State aid as a necessarily small school.

The traditional approach would also benefit from greater tolerance for partial reorganization. Too often the consolidation of schools and districts is an all-or-nothing activity from which no retreat is possible. Greater flexibility and deference to local conditions in the design of cooperatives and other organizational structures could encourage substantial progress.

Progress and the New Approach

As indicated above, the new approach includes efforts to identify and measure specific factors contributing to the difficulties of operating small, rural schools. These factors, which come in various forms, are attracting increasing attention. What follows is

a brief discussion of some of the promising directions in which the new approach is heading.

- ***Discrepancies in measures of ability to pay.*** Large discrepancies can exist between property and income-based measures of school district fiscal status. In certain kinds of rural areas it is common to find high levels of property wealth, but low levels of income. This is particularly common in resort areas. Although it has nothing to do with the size of a district per se, this can discriminate against property rich/income poor districts if State aid is tied solely to property wealth. Such districts would usually receive more aid if the measure of the district's economic status took account of the low level of local income. Of course, paying attention to these discrepancies requires the availability of up-to-date income data for each school district in a State. Augenblick and Nachtigal (1985) and Lamitie (1987) have recently underscored the importance of improving the availability of such data.

- ***Recruitment and retention of teachers.*** Since teachers' salaries in small, rural schools tend to be low and their work load heavy, it is not surprising that teacher quality and turnover are problems. These problems are especially troubling because the negative effects of an incompetent teacher seem more difficult to contain in a small, rural school than elsewhere (Bridges, 1986).

  Many proposals are being made so that States can intervene to alleviate this problem. One such proposal provides for categorical aid to help teachers become certified in multiple subjects. A more broadly trained faculty would give administrators flexibility that they would not otherwise have. There are also proposals to encourage districts to exchange teachers and administrators for fixed periods of time. These exchanges aim at dispelling the parochialism that is allegedly common in small, rural schools. However, these proposals would apply only to districts where parochialism was a problem. Even densely populated urban districts could qualify for such programs if they could demonstrate that parochialism was a difficulty. Finally, States are making efforts to compensate teachers directly—by raising the lowest teacher salaries in the State.

- ***Enrollment fluctuation.*** Fluctuation in the number of enrollees (from one year to the next) is a by-product of small size. This interferes with administrators' ability to plan, which makes it more difficult to administer small, rural schools. Although it is unclear how to remedy this problem, it is a difficulty that the State could address. This problem, however, is not unique to small school districts. Even in large districts, instability often afflicts small programs and units. State intervention to address these difficulties could also help large districts with many small programs or internal units. Were the State to become more sensitive to internal measures of size, large districts would be treated differently depending on how they were organized internally.

  In this case, one of the problems plaguing the new approach arises quite clearly. Size once again slips into the debate. Those who advocate such adjustments must once again contend with assertions that small size is inefficient and that reorganization into larger units is preferable.

- ***Technology development***. Some favor using public funds to develop technologies to overcome the problems of small, rural schools. This argument stresses the small market share that these schools occupy and the uniqueness of their needs. For example, software that enables a single person to teach several different foreign languages would probably help small, rural schools enormously. The low demand for such software, however, is likely to preclude even modest efforts to produce it. If technology holds the key to the future of small rural schools, demand may be insufficient to develop fully whatever potential is there.

- ***Scheduling flexibility.*** If school consolidation usually benefits atypical students who enroll in advanced specialized secondary courses,[2] are there not alternative ways of providing these courses without reorganizing the whole school system? States could, for example, facilitate the delivery of these courses at

non-conventional times such as on weekends or during the summer.

Other possibilities include residential learning centers to meet such students' special needs. Proposals for residential learning centers tend to be controversial since they call into question the viability of the sending school district. One possible and promising solution would be for the State (or perhaps region) to offer part-year courses of study in a residential school. For example, a student in a small, rural school who wanted to study advanced mathematics and science might leave home to attend such a school for one semester during the junior year. This might or might not be followed by a second semester of study during the senior year. The summer offers additional possible periods of sustained study. Finally, there is Ernest Boyer's proposal for portable science and other resource classrooms that would arrive at a particular district for a sustained period (Boyer, 1983).

- ***Improved guidance.*** Low levels of aspiration often characterize small, rural schools, but are certainly not confined to them. This problem cuts across rural-urban boundaries. The reasons for low aspirations may differ, but the State can address them simultaneously through a categorical form of aid that responds to local circumstances. For example, for high schools whose graduates pursue unusually narrow postsecondary activities, New York State is currently considering paying for supervised student visits to distant universities. Allocations of such aid would go to any district where student aspirations were demonstrably low. It is a good example of a program that could be supported by rural, as well as by urban political interests.

Final Comments

Each of the approaches sketched above has limitations. The new approach can be viewed as an outgrowth of frustration with the traditional one. A consensus on what constitutes a necessarily small school entitled to additional general State aid does not seem close at hand. The future looks more promising for the problem-oriented new approach. If educational technology further reduces the scale economies in education, problems in small, rural schools are likely to lend themselves more to precise surgical-like intervention than to broad initiatives such as complete district reorganization.

It is too early, however, to evaluate technology's success in reducing size economies. So long as it costs more to do the same thing in smaller, as opposed to larger settings, there will be a case to be made for the traditional policy approach.

Assessing the magnitude of size economies, the conditions under which they can be realized, and the nature and seriousness of other difficulties (having nothing to do with size) that small, rural schools face will help immensely in the important but difficult task of developing a coherent State policy on small, rural schools.

End Notes

[1]One of the standard criticisms of size economy research is that it fails to take account of all costs that accompany the transformation of small schools into larger ones. Transportation costs play an important role in this debate. (For a good example of this line of argument, see White and Tweeten, 1973.) More recently, Monk (1987) argues that even if economies of size are available, it is by no means obvious that school administrators and governing boards will routinely take advantage of them. This argument, which is compatible with the traditional emphasis on reorganization, carries implications for the training and practice of educational administrators.

[2]Only small percentages of students in large high schools enroll in classes that are unavailable to their peers attending small high schools. See Monk (1987).

Finally, I am indebted to William Deming, Emil J. Haller, and John Skawski for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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Rural Education and the Reform Movement

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The size and isolation of small, rural schools have historically created unique challenges for those trying to provide rural students with educational opportunities. The current reform movement is creating additional challenges for small, rural schools. This paper provides a brief overview of the reform movement, the regional context in which small, rural schools operate, the challenges the reform movement has created for these schools, how they have responded to them, and the policy implications of these challenges and responses.

The Reform Movement

Educational reform is a continuing process—there are peaks and valleys, but reform is always underway someplace. Hence, it is difficult to pinpoint when the latest reform wave started to build. The rash of State-mandated minimal competency testing requirements for high school graduation may have lent it some impetus, but the appearance of *A Nation at Risk* was indisputably the event that caused almost everyone to jump on the reform band wagon.

The list of reform issues is lengthy. No one State or district is attempting to respond to all of them, but in rural education there is a core of issues on which the reform movement concentrates.

Reform legislation, policies, and regulations have:

- Emphasized teachers' and administrators' accountability—defined in terms of student performance, teacher evaluation, and administrator evaluation;
- Stressed standards for students that are enforced through course requirements, end-of-course exams, promotion requirements, competency-based programs, and graduation exams;

- Focused on learning opportunities defined in terms of the number and kinds of offerings required, the amount of instructional time provided, and time-on-task requirements;
- Raised standards for staff, increasing requirements for credentials and staff development; and
- Specified standards for student facilities, instructional resources, and support services.

The Context

Reforms have not been the same in all regions of the country. This is especially true for rural education in which variations occur because the definition of "rural" varies from region to region. A brief review of these differences can help to explain the variety of rural reforms.

How one defines "small" depends upon where one is. North Carolina, for example, has only two high schools with fewer than 100 students, but more than half of North Dakota high schools have fewer than 100. A "small" high school of 250 students in North Carolina would be a relatively large one in North Dakota.

There are examples of geographical isolation in all rural areas. South Carolina and Maine have small coastal islands with no connecting bridges to the mainland; West Virginia and Idaho have communities that are isolated by mountains; and, huge distances isolate towns on the plains of Montana and South Dakota.

Isolation can also be defined in terms of cultural and linguistic differences that divide people from each other. Hispanics living in small, rural communities in southeastern Texas and Native Americans living in southwestern Colorado provide two examples.

Isolation can also result from the value people place on education. In the past, southerners used lack of education as an economic control mechanism to isolate both black and white textile workers. However, the people who settled in Minnesota and Iowa placed a high value on education.

The organizational framework of rural education also varies from region to region. Whereas the Plains States are strongly committed to local control, those in the Southeast have centralized control at the State department level. These differences significantly influence how rural schools participate in the reform movement.

Despite these differences, there are common features. The decline of agriculture and the disappearance of the family farm as a primary source of income are common to all areas. The decline in agriculture and accompanying erosion of the tax base have affected rural areas across the board. In many such areas, the primary sources of income are transfer payments; jobs are more difficult to find, and more people are commuting to and from the city.

Regardless of their location, the interplay between various aspects of the reform movement and each rural district's situation creates challenges for small, rural schools. For example, an expansion of learning opportunities presents very small schools in the Plains and Northwest with a different set of problems than those faced by the relatively few small schools in the Southeast.

For the South, the historical value placed on learning opportunities is a crucial issue; until recently, education was used as a control mechanism. This practice began with denying slaves the opportunity to learn to read and write and continued through the days of "separate but equal" schools. Whites living in "textile" towns also had few learning opportunities. This helped to ensure a supply of minimum wage earners. More importantly, using education as a control mechanism created a mind set that defined sufficient learning opportunities at levels below those of other regions. This contributed to the South's historically poor performance on measures of academic achievement. Data from the last several years suggest that the South is catching up, but using education as a control mechanism continues to be an issue.

The rural Southwest and West differ from other regions in the number and percentage of students for whom English is a second language and who come from culturally diverse backgrounds. A small, rural Hispanic community in Texas requires different learning opportunities from those needed by residents of a small, northeastern town settled by the English during the 1700s.

Economic restructuring is affecting all rural areas, but the changes vary both across and within regions. The large, family-owned farms of the Plains and the tenant-operated farms of the South are both experiencing economic difficulties. Many members of farm families will have to seek employment elsewhere. Learning opportunities required to support these transitions will differ depending upon students' economic and educational backgrounds. The response in Iowa will differ from the response in South Carolina.

Another difference that occurs both within and across regions relates to legislative control. States that are predominantly rural will respond differently to rural educational issues than those that are predominantly urban. Florida, New York, and California will probably respond differently from Maine, Montana, and Mississippi. In reviewing some of the challenges facing rural education, it is important to remember these regional and State differences.

The Challenge

Most of the challenges rural schools face are the result of a combination of reforms. For example, increasing the required number of kinds of learning opportunities combined with small enrollments and teacher allocation formulas create a challenge for some small schools. Imagine a State where the number of teachers for high school is based on a per-pupil formula that does not have a "floor." Assume next that the State requires that physics be offered. In a high school with 200 students, in which only four or five students are possibly interested in taking this course, the administrator and science teacher clearly face a challenge.

Imagine, in this example, different credential requirements for teachers of biological sciences and those of physical sciences. Assume also that credential requirements for junior high and senior high teachers differ, and that the school serves grades 7 through 12. Under such circumstances, the challenge grows and grows with each requirement added by educational reforms.

Creative educators can find ways to respond to such challenges. Using telecommunications technology and sharing staff between schools and districts are two such responses. Ironically, however, creativity itself may result in new challenges. For example, using an interactive audio system to provide physics instruction for students in small schools requires that the region have a telephone system adequate to ensure communication even on days when it rains. This is not always the case in rural America.

Often, inflexible use of funds also blocks avenues. For example, sharing teachers among schools requires travel funds, but if dollars are not specifically allocated for this purpose, a school system may not be able to make creative staff assignments.

In some States, reforms have specified the number and kinds of reference materials required in a school's media center. When this requirement is combined with a per-pupil funding formula, the small, rural school faces another dilemma. The per-pupil cost of materials and equipment is higher for small schools, but few funding formulas take this into consideration.

Some requirements for specific support services present geographically isolated schools with a tough set of decisions to make. For example, the new credential requirements for guidance counselors in elementary schools compound the already limited availability of counselors in these areas. Requirements for social workers, nurses, and psychologists, despite insufficient per-pupil staff allocation formulas, create similar staffing problems. Another critical factor that impedes progress comes into play when States mandate specific facilities for small, rural schools without providing construction funds or changing existing regulations that prevent schools from sharing facilities with social agencies, community colleges, or other schools.

A final example pertains to the paperwork load associated with accountability. When a school has only one administrator and secretary, completing required State and Federal forms can impose additional burdens. "Pushing paper" is more of a problem for small schools than for larger schools with bigger administrative staffs because the small number of students does not reduce the paperwork proportionately. This burden is especially great in schools where the administrator also has to teach.

Responding to the Challenge

Some responses to these challenges have already been mentioned. The following list presents these techniques and other approaches that small, rural schools can employ to serve their students better: (1) use telecommunications technology; (2) install interactive videodisc technology and computer-assisted instruction; (3) schedule school day, week, and/or semester flexibility; (4) match class size with instructional mode; (5) share staff with other schools and districts; (6) share instructional resources with other schools and districts; (7) employ part-time instructional staff; (8) differentiate staff roles; (9) use volunteers to instruct and provide other services; (10) integrate the curriculum; (11) use an outcome-based curriculum; (12) employ school-based enterprises; and (13) coordinate social services, getting other agencies to provide school-based social services.

Before implementing any of these approaches, four key ingredients must be present. First, those implementing new approaches must be aware of the challenge this process presents. Selecting a site-specific approach is critical to success because those involved must recognize a need, believe that they have the ability to meet the need, and understand the techniques and procedures that will help them accomplish their goals.

The second ingredient is leadership. The board of education, the superintendent, the principal, the teachers, the support staff, and the community must work together in responding to these challenges. This will not happen unless policymakers, administrators, and managers provide the necessary long- and short-term leadership.

The third ingredient is trust. Effective leadership and a "can-do" attitude are not possible unless those responding to the challenge trust each other and can work together. If trust is lacking in a small, rural school facing the challenges of educational reform, then the first step must be to cultivate it.

The final ingredient is opportunity. Policymakers who control educational funding must provide small, rural schools with opportunities to respond.

Policy Implications

Despite pressing challenges, rural schools can use activities similar to those listed above to respond to them. The schools can successfully implement changes by combining the following key opportunity-related factors: funding, flexibility, and technical assistance.

Small, rural schools need to be given sufficient funds to respond to mandated reforms. When mandated programs are in areas where the primary responsibility for funding education is local, the State must consider the districts' ability to raise revenue. If districts are willing to meet fiscal requirements at or above the State average, but still cannot raise sufficient revenue, then the State should provide the necessary funds.

When educational funding is a State responsibility, the States must provide the funds necessary to implement mandated reforms. This means that per-pupil based funding formulas should have "floors" that take into consideration the special needs of small, rural schools.

Adequate funding would provide them with the necessary resources to respond to the realities of reform. However, adequate funding (as described above) may not be forthcoming in the near future. Hence, small, rural schools need another way to respond to these challenges.

These school districts should be given flexibility to respond to the "spirit" of the requirements rather than the "letter of the law." Small, rural schools should demonstrate their accountability by providing evidence that they are meeting the intent of the regulations. When they cannot show that students have access to appropriate learning opportunities or are acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to function in society, such schools should be willing to accept "receivership" status.

Giving small, rural schools increased flexibility without assistance will not work. Teachers and administrators will need support in making efficient and effective use of the opportunities flexibility provides. State departments of education, regional laboratories,

and organizations specifically formed to serve rural schools should provide the required technical assistance.

Added flexibility can help small, rural schools to be creative and innovative in improving learning experiences for rural students. State education agencies, regional educational laboratories, and other rural education organizations can help support these efforts. It is crucial that rural educators react enthusiastically by planning and implementing improved approaches for serving rural students. If they do not take advantage of these opportunities, the consequences can be serious: increased standardization that limits creativity; more centralized control; and a limiting effect on local and individual "ownership," which hurts professionalism.

Reform is necessary to control the changes that are occurring in rural America and to help rural schools grow to meet the challenges these changes pose. The general context of rural education has been briefly reviewed here and clearly indicates that reforms present rural schools with great challenges, but also provide them with unique opportunities. Fortunately, rural schools are well positioned to meet these challenges successfully by using these opportunities to the fullest.

A Local School Perspective

James D. Jess

Jim Jess, a school superintendent, a founder of People United for Rural Education, past president of the National Rural Education Association, and a member of Iowa's Excellence in Education Task Force, is committed to improving the status of education in rural America.

Current economic conditions in much of rural America are pressuring rural schools to conform to an educational model designed primarily for their urban counterparts. This does not work well because rural schools are far more diverse than urban ones: demographic, economic, cultural, and social differences make it almost impossible to compare rural schools in one region to those in other areas. Unfortunately, researchers, theorists, and policymakers often overlook these differences when they attempt to upgrade schools. Efforts to improve rural education, however, must capitalize on the strengths of local schools and work to alleviate their problems. Trying to force them into an inappropriate model is bound to fail.

Background

Midwestern States—including Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin—are rich in small schools. Nearly one-half of the region's 3,800 school districts enroll fewer than 1,000 students and 30 percent are K-12/1-12 districts with enrollments below 900. Michigan and Ohio alone boast 19 one-teacher schools. The obvious strengths of these rural schools are well known:

- The classes are small;
- Individual attention is the order of the day;
- Students have many opportunities to lead and to develop individual talents;
- Students can and do participate more in extracurricular activities;
- The environment is safe and orderly;
- Community involvement and support are strong;
- Students, teachers, and parents care about each other;

- Informal structures enhance flexibility, creativity, and shared decisionmaking;
- Schools are central to their communities' educational, recreational, and cultural activities; and
- When the rural school thrives, so does the community around it.

Rural schools also encounter obvious problems resulting from their small size, isolation, and sparse population:

- Faculty must teach many different subjects, sometimes outside their major fields;
- Schools often lack up-to-date labs, libraries, and specialized equipment;
- They often lack the cultural assets found in urban areas (museums, libraries, theaters, access to concerts, etc.);
- They usually suffer from inadequate financial resources;
- Professional salaries are frequently not competitive with those of their urban and suburban counterparts;
- Heavy workloads, limited resources, low salaries, lack of professional recognition, and low esteem for rural educators make it difficult for rural schools to attract and retain outstanding teachers and administrators; and
- Distances from colleges and universities and between neighboring schools often limit professional interaction and development among rural educators.

A less obvious, but even greater disadvantage derives from academics' and policymakers' unintentional neglect of rural schools. Although rural education is a huge enterprise that comprises two-thirds of our Nation's 15,600 local school systems and serves nearly one-third of our Nation's elementary and secondary school youngsters, we know relatively little about how these schools work in their various settings and how we can respond to their special needs. The less obvious, but more serious problems facing rural education are:

- A historical anti-rural bias in an urban-oriented society;
- Education planners' and policymakers' neglect of rural education;
- Lack of appreciation and understanding of the differences between rural and urban schools;
- Insufficient initiative and support to carry out an agenda for rural education research and development; and
- The lack of a sophisticated, well-structured rural education network.

Perceptions

The current economic pressures on rural education have hit the midwestern farm belt especially hard. The agricultural economy is experiencing large surpluses, low grain prices, and declining land values which cause farmers' net worth to plummet. This led to numerous farm foreclosures, as well as farm sales for those who can no longer afford to make their livelihood from the land. Small towns are watching their main streets deteriorate—as businesses fail, banks close, workers are laid off, and unusually high unemployment flourishes. The personal problems associated with losing family farms, the rising number of low income families, and the accompanying changes in life-styles can be devastating. These changes often result in depression which, in turn, sometimes leads to drug and alcohol abuse or suicide. Unfortunately, the portrayal of the rural crisis in the movie, "Country," is painfully true in many midwestern farming communities.

Rural schools are being forced to fight for their existence. Declining enrollments, coupled with delinquent property tax payments and dwindling resources, are causing schools to cut back programs. In many rural schools morale among students and staff is at an all-time low.

Trends

The push for educational excellence coupled with the rural Midwest's economic depression has presented rural schools with a

double challenge. State legislatures are demanding tougher school standards: mandating new programs; requiring more courses; lengthening the school day; calling for a longer school year; and making professional certification requirements more rigorous. Policymakers have also lengthened pre-service programs, raised in-service requirements for recertification, and shortened certification periods.

Interstate competition is also causing legislatures to set higher minimum starting salaries for new teachers and raise the average pay for seasoned instructors, tying State contributions to performance pay plans and extended employment contracts. Intra-district competition for scarce new dollars is drawing battle lines between large and small, urban and rural educators.

The political remedy is to call for greater school efficiency: minimum school enrollment size; maximum pupil-teacher ratios; a narrower disparity in statewide per-pupil expenditures; containment of administrative overhead, operation expenses, and maintenance costs; better use of facilities; and statewide plans for restructuring school districts. Moreover, legislators use the results of accountability studies and school efficiency reports to justify their requirement that school districts operate more efficiently.

They consider large schools located in densely populated metropolitan cities more efficient than those in sparsely populated rural areas. Politicians also rebuke rural schools for the quality of their education—based on number of units offered; the teachers' education and degree of experience; the results of College Board tests; and the number of graduates who qualify as merit scholars. Affluent suburban schools generally outshine the rural schools in all four of these areas.

No one, however, publicizes the remarkable achievements of Iowa's rural schools. In Iowa, of all the types of schools, the small, rural schools have the highest percentage of students who take College Board tests and enroll in postsecondary institutions. These rural students also have the lowest dropout rates among all the different size school categories, as well as the highest percentage of students involved in extracurricular activities. In addition, Iowa's small, rural schools have shown the greatest support for the passage of optional tax referenda to supplement their local budgets.

A small, rural school in the CAL Community located in north central Iowa is a shining example of community support for excellence in education. CAL's 250 students in K-12 and a 50-student, 2-year pre-kindergarten program for 3- and 4-year-olds have an inspiring record of academic success. The school's standardized student achievement scores are among the highest in the State and Nation. Student and teacher attendance at CAL averages 96 percent. The school has not had a student drop out in more than 10 years and nearly 85 percent of the CAL graduates pursue higher education with unusual success. At CAL, parents and grandparents enthusiastically volunteer their services. The school opens its facilities to the community residents and 94 percent of them give local funding to the school. The voters in the district have passed every local option tax referendum available with majority votes in excess of 80 percent.

The Governor of Iowa recognized CAL as having one of the State's 15 exemplary partnerships in education (the CAL Theatre and Concert Series) in 1985. CAL's elementary school was one of Iowa's eight nominees for the U.S. Department of Education's 1985-86 Elementary School Recognition Program and one of its elementary teachers represented Iowa's teachers at the 1986 National Teachers' Forum in Washington, D.C. The CAL High School, with a 9th-12th grade enrollment of 84, was selected as one of the Nation's 271 outstanding public and private secondary schools in the 1986–87 Secondary School Recognition Program. The site visitor who observed the school to substantiate information in the school's application told school authorities, "CAL has everything in place that most educators strive a lifetime to achieve in their schools."

Conclusions

The Nation's pursuit of excellence in education is admirable and the States' quest for efficiency is commendable. What is neither admirable nor commendable, however, is the sacrifice being forced

upon rural education as a result of the two forces working against each other. Rural schools are unique. They operate under different conditions, and hold a special place in their communities. They are the lifeblood of rural America and hold the promise of its future development.

Rural education requires special attention from the academicians and policymakers who affect its welfare. This Nation requires a strong educational system that serves the needs and desires of both urban and rural communities. What is good for the delivery of programs and services to one is not necessarily appropriate for the other. Excellence in education can be packaged in various ways in myriad settings, but it always needs local input, support, and acceptance.

Recommendations

Meeting the challenges that face education in rural America will require the special attention of local, regional, and State authorities. Local authorities need to:

- Decide how schools can better serve children and the community;
- Use local resources and new technologies to improve and expand educational opportunities;
- Consolidate low-enrollment, high-cost vocational and enrichment courses among clusters of small schools;
- Organize to assure a strong, influential voice for rural education; and
- Demand equitable attention from State, regional, and national agencies and institutions to ensure that rural education receives its fair share of information, services, and assistance.

State authorities need to realize that a decentralized secondary educational system can and will serve areas with the size and social cohesion of the midwestern States. Small and large schools—rural and urban—both have their strengths. Funding and structure should recognize these strengths and allow diversity to flourish. New standards, revised certification requirements, updated funding formulas, and other devices to promote excellence in education will help rural communities develop better schools. These standards should not, however, be ploys designed to force small schools to consolidate and drive them out of small, rural communities.

The regional education laboratories are in a favorable position to develop a rural school network in their regions, as well as to foster communication among the regions throughout the United States. The development of a successful network will require a commitment from the leaders of the educational stakeholders in the region—State legislatures, State departments of education, intermediate services units, local school districts, and other public and private groups interested in rural education and communities. Such a network will generate new ideas, explore and publicize promising practices, build collaborative relationships, and put theory into practice using a variety of regional agents. Without the existence of this kind of network, rural school improvement efforts will never move from fantasy to reality.

The U.S. Department of Education recognizes rural America's valuable contributions to our country's social and economic development. The Department's stated policy on rural education for the '80s has ensured that rural education receives an equitable share of the information, services, assistance, and funds available from and through the Department. This kind of commitment is as important today as it was when the policy was adopted in 1983. It is equally important that the Department's commitment to rural education remain in force as we head into the 21st Century.

An Education Writer's Reflections on Rural Education

Jack L. Kennedy

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For more than a century, Nebraskans have proudly nurtured their natural and human resources. Nebraska opened the first graduate school west of the Mississippi, created a nationally known educational television network, and developed multi-district educational service units for joint programming and administration. With thousands of miles of often barren land before them, pioneer Nebraskans opened public schools in every township. Realizing that the intellect needed to be cultivated as assiduously as the soil, they committed themselves to local education.

This commitment to local control coupled with a sluggish rural economy, however, has limited Nebraskans' ability to respond to the changing needs of students today. Nebraskans need to broaden the State's economic base through district mergers, cooperative agreements, and a more varied curriculum. Studies show that Nebraska lags behind other States in these areas, and in its efforts to help students meet the demands of the future.

The national average for State aid to public schools is 50 percent, but Nebraska's State aid averages only 27 percent, one of the lowest in the United States. The number of school districts, however, compounds the financial problems, and makes it difficult to devise equitable aid formulas. Until 1980, Nebraska had more school districts than any other State, but today she ranks fourth behind Texas, California, and Illinois. Today, there are 927 school districts, compared to 1,167 in 1976. Either voluntarily or because of financial problems, the State lost 28 public school districts in the 1985-86 school year alone.

More than 67 percent of the districts, a total of 622, are actually only one school, for kindergarten through the eighth grade. Most of them are in rural areas. More than half of these 622 districts (393) have 29 students or less. Fifty of these K-8 schools (districts) have only four or five students enrolled. Many are near larger

K-12 districts, and merger might be feasible. However, patrons in the small schools say they like local control of education, and the low pupil-teacher ratio.

Several small, rural districts apparently exist only for tax purposes. A study by the State education department shows that a farmer in one northeast Nebraska county, for example, may pay a tax rate of only 30 cents per $100 of valuation, while a neighbor pays $3 per $100 to support a school. In other words, with so many small districts, tax rates vary widely. By simply buying property across the road in another school district, a farmer-parent-taxpayer may cut his or her tax rate significantly. Rural residents often resist school mergers, instead seeking alternatives such as cooperation through educational service units or agreeing to share local resources. This has fostered some creative solutions, including joint staff training, curriculum planning, teacher sharing, or planning with assistance from Kearney State College, the University of Nebraska, or Kansas State University.

Like many other rural States, Nebraska is struggling to raise educational standards despite her economic woes. Neighboring States face similar frustrations as they attempt to meet the demanding standards set by State or national officials, while a shaky farm economy causes State income to shrink.

This is not a new problem, as my experience as a junior and senior high school teacher in Galena, Kansas in the 1950s demonstrates. Approximately 250 of Galena's 4,000 residents attended the high school. The average income of parents was relatively low, and the once prosperous lead and zinc mining industry had declined. Sincere, dedicated teachers staffed the schools, but low pay and insufficient funds for equipment and supplies discouraged new teachers from staying for long. Students knew that many of the teachers would not return the following year. This rapid turnover of teachers hurts continuity in the curriculum, some studies show, and makes it difficult to do long-range counseling with students. A teacher who gets to know a student may not be there next year.

The district resisted merging with a smaller but wealthier adjacent district, but in recent years, Galena has joined a growing number of districts that cooperate in special education and in other areas.

The school merger movement that Kansas began in the 1960s reduced the total number of districts from more than 1,000 to about 308. As Robert Haderlein (a longtime Girard, Kansas, school board member and former president of the National Association of School Boards) noted, this change was often painful, but as a result, education improved. He testifies that his own student days in a small high school did not prepare him adequately for college and for later life.

"If you have fewer than 100 kids in high school," he comments, "you can't have computers, creative writing, [and] the fine arts." Adequate science and mathematics programs and other specialized courses, he points out, are also likely to be in short supply. "You may have the best building in the world and still be unable to offer the courses which students need or which State and national studies require," Haderlein contends. "Students," he adds, "can't get a good, comprehensive education in tiny, inadequate high schools."

Authorities do not agree on the ideal size for a school or a district. In fact, some high schools in Nebraska have only 25 students. These small-school students do well on college entrance tests, but no one will ever know how well they might have done if they had been able to take courses that were unavailable because of limited curriculum and staff. What career options they might have entertained had they had a fuller curriculum remains a permanent rhetorical question. Several students interviewed have said they wished they had journalism classes, better science classes, or other courses which might give them a broader idea of future job opportunities.

Those limitations, and the occasional resistance to change and cooperation, were evident during my visit a few years ago to a small high school in central Nebraska, where a young, energetic social studies teacher's ability and commitment entranced his six students. More students would have benefited (and the teacher would have been better paid) if the 350-student, K-12 district had been willing to merge or cooperate with a smaller district 10 miles

away. That would have enlarged this teacher's social studies class size to about 16 or 17, without depriving each student of adequate individual attention.

Resistance to change, lack of cooperation, and closings of schools are not confined to rural areas, however. Urbanites face many of the same concerns. Across the Nation, city residents are saying they do not want a neighborhood to die when a school closes. Like their rural counterparts, they do not favor busing students for long distances, particularly if the school at the end of the ride is no better than the one closed near home. Urban educators are also trying to define what is too large or too small and arguing that not all schools need to house hundreds of students. Schools across the country are struggling to give youngsters personal attention while meeting demands for foreign languages, more composition, and better math and science teaching.

Concerns about size, curriculum, and financing put new pressures on rural schools today. According to one small district superintendent, parents who realize that their children will not remain on the farm want the school district to offer more vocational programs, science, and other subjects that will prepare students for non-farm employment. These same parents, however, often cannot afford or are unwilling to pay for the necessary changes.

There are other remedies beyond cooperation, better-financed school districts, and better-planned and well-justified school mergers or closings. Some authorities say small towns and rural areas must look at themselves and improve their atmosphere and quality of life, in order to attract and hold students and teachers. A recent Kansas State University (KSU) study found that many new teachers liked their rural school assignments and expected to work hard, but many others said "boredom, isolation, lack of entertainment, and lack of people their age" caused dissatisfaction. Inadequate housing is also a problem. As one graduate student told a rural education seminar, "They don't build many apartment complexes in a town of 300."

In an effort to expand services, more districts are learning to work together, but even traditional rural resources, like traveling bookmobiles, have their drawbacks. During one visit to a rural elementary school, a teacher was successfully instructing six grades in one room simultaneously when the bookmobile arrived outside. When the students returned to the room with their books, I asked one boy about the one he'd picked.

"I like books on horses", the school board president's son replied. "I've read this before, but it is the only one they had in the bookmobile." Bookmobiles, instructional television, computer networks, and other approaches can help erase some rural inequities, but rural schools often need more local or State funding, better coordination, and better scheduling to improve. Neither teachers nor technology are easy to acquire for under-financed rural areas.

Sue Goodson, a former president of the Nebraska Congress of Parents and Teachers who was raised in a rural community near Lincoln, described a typical school merger situation with its financial considerations, benefits, and drawbacks in a letter to the author:

> I graduated several years before consolidation reached my school, but towns around had been forced to consolidate. . . . It was an ever-present threat. Consolidation didn't come easy, but [the towns of] Alexandria, Daykin, and Tobias could not afford separate schools. For several years, each town had [an] elementary school, with secondary students attending classes in Tobias. Finally, with no community willing to "give" their school to another town, a site several miles outside of Daykin was selected for a K-12 building. No student is currently transported more than 15 miles, or for 30 minutes. Budget difficulties no longer allow for the after-school activities bus, so many students drive.
>
> Senior citizens in the towns find it more difficult to attend school activities, but carpooling and using the Meals on Wheels van make it possible for many of them to attend plays, concerts and other school programs. . . .
>
> The towns are still viable. The combined populations would not reach 750, but they work together for their school and compete for State Community Achievement awards.

[The consolidated school] has programs none of the [smaller] schools could afford [alone]: home economics, family living, metal and wood shops, college preparatory English, and ceramics, French and Spanish. They are examining ways to continue to offer physics on at least an every-other-year basis.

Teachers teach in their speciality areas, using an open classroom approach. It was not easily accepted by parents, but a number of teachers [now] indicate they would resign if the district returned to traditional closed, self-contained classrooms.

Enrollment is 190, of which about 90 are in the 9th-12th grade high school. [The consolidated school] has never experienced difficulty in finding teachers. There is rarely a changeover in teachers. This has both positive and negative aspects. It is difficult to remove a teacher who may no longer be effective, and early retirement is not an incentive.

What does the future hold for small, rural schools? There is an increasing pride in the benefits that good, small, rural schools with lower class sizes can give. Many recognize that situations in which students receive a great deal of individual attention can foster personal and academic growth. There is increased willingness to work together, whether to better educate students for the future or to avoid dropping employees when schools close.

The realities of school finance in hard-pressed, predominately rural States, however, are barriers to school improvement. Many think this will endanger the movement. During the 1988 Nebraska legislative session, the schools received $10 million more in State aid. But there were many aid reductions in recent years, and the $10 million only brought them back up to 1983 levels.

A recent study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching revealed that Nebraska schools are using more technology and have made many changes since the reform movement began nationwide in 1983. But teacher morale is low, the study found. This may be due to the fact that teacher pay is about $4,000 below the national average and the State aid level is about half of the 50 percent national average. (Source: State Education Commissioner Joe Lutjeharms and Pat Richey, President of the Nebraska State Education Association. Richey and Lutjeharms see poor financing and teacher morale as key roadblocks to further improvement in Nebraska schools.)

A few years ago, several school districts in Nebraska saw they could benefit from sharing resources to improve vocational education for students. Since the State legislature provides only about $200,000 in aid for secondary vocational education, most funds come from local taxes or Federal aid. Educational service units and individual superintendents began to consider busing students to schools which offered good vocational programs, or to construct centralized facilities with adequate shops and equipment. But lack of funding and the inability of local districts to agree on management and scheduling killed the idea. Use of traveling vocational shop vans was abandoned for the same reasons.

Despite such problems with finances and local control, more progressive school districts are realizing that they can no longer afford to "go it alone." And as taxes and expectations for schools rise, more educators and policymakers are becoming aware that they must take action.

The Nebraska Legislature is studying new school merger legislation, as well as changes in the State's tax structure. More school districts are working together voluntarily to find keys to open doors to their children's future. A Syracuse University study done for the Nebraska Legislature says the State should begin a major school district merger effort, to combat "disparities in education opportunities [that] are dramatic and unfair." The study, which calculated the difference between each school district's educational needs and its ability to pay for them, says the four districts with the lowest income per student also have the fewest residents per student. The study further suggests that aid programs be modified to direct assistance to the districts that are in poor fiscal condition because of economic and social factors beyond their control.

But James Havelka, the Rising City superintendent who is president of the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association, questioned the study's emphasis on fiscal efficiency. "Kids are not cattle," he observed. Larger schools might be more efficient, Havelka acknowledged, but the pupil-teacher ratio would rise, and there would be fewer opportunities for extracurricular activities and parental involvement. Some small schools exist only to provide a low tax rate, Havelka conceded, "but as a whole, the disparities are not as great as one might think." County-wide districts would cost more if a new central building were needed, he added.

A 1987 study by rural expert Jonathan Sher for the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association found that the State does have school tax and State aid problems. Havelka allowed this, but noted that Sher said school mergers would not guarantee better schools. Another study, from Cornell University, recently also found that school reorganization "has very serious deficiencies," according to Havelka.

Rural school leaders and residents still cherish the local control they first established in pioneer days. They want to keep decision-making close to home, and are wary of any effort to impose State coordination or control. State department of education mandates concerning the number of media center resources to be added each year, for example, have brought protestors to board meetings.

As budgets tighten, unwillingness to consider reasonable mergers, multi-district cooperative agreements, and other alternatives can only further restrict districts' ability to provide for their children's future. Improvement of rural education will require sharing, innovation, additional State and local or Federal resources—and a pioneer's willingness to overcome real and imaginary boundaries.

Section III

School Improvement Strategies for Rural Education

Implementation of Promising Practices in Rural Settings: Necessary Conditions

Cheryl Chase Kane

Cheryl Chase Kane has worked extensively in school improvement efforts, identifying and implementing promising practices in rural settings. Through technical assistance and staff development activities, she has helped schools understand the change process to make promising practices work for them.

Promising practices are no more or less than what their name indicates—procedures that have worked in one place and are likely to work elsewhere. Although implementing such practices is a common strategy for school improvement, the process is often more complicated than it seems. Complications usually arise when an organization in one area tries to implement practices that have been effective in other locales. To make this transition successful, those importing the new practices often need outside assistance to help them integrate innovations into their routine operations. This is particularly true in rural areas where conditions may differ greatly from those in the place where the procedures were first successful. In addition, rural schools often enjoy far fewer staff members and less money to help them adjust to or adopt a new program.

Transferring practices, however, has great potential. If a promising practice is identified, all schools facing similar problems can benefit from adopting the program and the materials and processes involved without incurring the high costs of developing and refining a new program themselves. This is especially important for rural schools, which are usually small and often lack the financial and human resources to originate new programs.

The purpose of implementing new practices is to remedy a problem or, generally, to improve the quality of education being provided. Implementation itself comes after one has diagnosed problems or needs, decided to make improvements, examined alternative strategies, laid the groundwork and prepared individuals for the changes, and identified barriers to the change and ways of dealing with them. Once these steps have been completed and the practice has been introduced at the new site, those implementing the changes can provide appropriate training

and assistance, modifying it to fit with the new circumstances until the practice eventually becomes integrated into the system.

In the abstract, implementation seems a simple process, described at length in the school improvement literature.[1] In practice, it is very complex and may fail if conditions in the adopting site are not conducive to implementing a new practice. The promising practice itself is simply a way of proceeding. However, it must be selected and used properly, and certain programmatic and environmental conditions must be met before the practice can realize its potential.

Potential adopters must be particularly careful to consider not only the programmatic circumstances in which an innovation is to be implemented, but also the broader environmental context of the implementing organization.

Too often, well-meaning educators carelessly implement promising new practices in schools without careful consideration of the prevailing conditions already impacting staff and students. The result is burnout and failure to realize the practice's potential because the conditions necessary for its success were not met. There are two significant reasons this can be especially damaging in rural schools. First, rural schools inherently have few human and fiscal resources available to devote to new procedures, so failure is particularly costly in terms of lost opportunity. Second, since one of the best predictors of success in implementing promising practices is past success at having done so, a failure can have long-term negative consequences for a district's ability to meet future problems through innovation.

The next section reviews the types of circumstances that are likely to help or hinder the implementation of promising practices in rural areas.

Background

To examine which conditions support improvement efforts, it is useful to compare findings from two Federal education programs. The first is the Department of Education's Secondary School Recognition Program, which identifies and recognizes exemplary schools throughout the country. Findings from a study of this program (1983-85) help answer the question: What is an effective rural school like? The second program is the (former) Office of Education's Rural Experimental Schools Program (1970s) which promoted comprehensive change in school districts. An analysis of this program informs the question: What conditions hinder rural areas in implementing promising practices?

A comparison of the findings of these two very different programs illustrates the conditions necessary to effectively implement promising practices in rural settings. Before comparing the two, the results of each program will be described separately.

The Secondary School Recognition Program

The Secondary School Recognition Program set out to "identify and recognize unusually successful public secondary schools and through publicity and other means encourage their emulation by other educators."[2] When Research for Better Schools (RBS) analyzed the data collected from the 571 schools recognized from 1983 to 1985, they discovered nine attributes that characterized all these effective schools. Despite the rich diversity of their programs, all exhibited:

- Clear goals and core values;
- Strong leaders;
- Good people and a good environment;
- Ability to solve problems and improve schools;
- Ability to work with the community;
- Control and discretion;
- Recognition and rewards for teaching;
- Positive student-teacher relationships; and
- High expectations and recognition of achievement.

These nine elements, discussed later in this paper, constitute a "portrait" of success. Schools with these elements were able to develop programs that were unusually successful in meeting students' needs. The nine characteristics do not specify what types of practices or programs should be implemented. Nor do they prescribe a particular strategy for improvement. They do suggest,

however, that certain conditions enable schools to respond creatively to the almost endless combinations of needs presented by the communities they serve.

The schools identified through the Secondary School Recognition Program are located in extremely diverse communities. Approximately 25 percent of the schools are urban, 15 percent rural, and 60 percent suburban. Although rural schools were underrepresented in proportion to their overall number, "the chances of recognition once nominated were no less for rural schools"[3] than for ones in urban and suburban areas.

Schools also varied greatly in the wealth of the communities they served—measured in terms of numbers of students from low-income families. Approximately 25 percent of the schools recognized by the program served communities where less than 5 percent of the students came from low-income families, but slightly over 20 percent of the schools served communities where more than a fourth of the students came from low-income families. Although the sizes of the communities and their wealth varied, the attributes of effective schools remained constant. Issues concerning differences among rural, suburban, and urban schools—including differences between rich and poor schools—did not emerge. Characterized by the nine attributes identified and subsequently labeled by RBS as "the dynamics of success," these effective schools were more alike than different.

The Rural Experimental Schools Program

The Rural Experimental Schools Program, which developed in response to the perceived failure of efforts to improve rural education in the 1960s, supported comprehensive educational change in rural communities. Introducing a study of this program, Herriott and Gross reported that prior to this initiative, "nearly every systematic study of the fate of a specific educational innovation of public schools has concluded that its anticipated outcomes were not achieved, that its educational benefits were minimal, or that it was not fully implemented."[4]

The Rural Experimental Schools Program, which was targeted to school districts with fewer than 2,500 students, offered 5-year support for comprehensive education change in 10 geographically dispersed rural school districts. "Comprehensive" change required developing and importing promising practices across the board in the districts' educational programs. Through this program, the Federal Government hoped to stimulate long-lasting improvements in these districts and to study the process of change in rural environments. The story of the 10 rural school districts, which received funding amounting to 15 percent of their total budget, depicts the conditions that impede program implementation. Although many districts experienced "small success,"[5] Rosenblum and Louis concluded that "the program promised much more than it was eventually able to deliver."[6] They identified a number of barriers to improving rural schools. The findings (summarized in figure 1) are familiar to educators involved in improvement efforts. Nonetheless, it is important to keep them in mind when making decisions about future activities.

Implications

The contrast between the findings on the Secondary School Recognition Program and on the Rural Experimental Schools Program is striking. Although neither set indicates specific strategies to improve rural schools, they do suggest strongly the conditions under which improvement can take place.

Clear Goals and Core Values

The Secondary School Recognition Program, which does not involve Federal intervention but examines schools in their "natural" setting, found that effective schools are characterized by clear goals and core values—a sense of shared purpose with parents, teachers, students, and administrators all working toward the same ends. The primary goal was maximum student achievement—indicated by the teachers' frequent statements that all students can succeed. Effective schools act on their behalf, establish targets to help them work toward their goals, and monitor their performance. The whole school community values these goals and evaluates all new ideas or ways of behaving according to how well they will further the school's ultimate purpose.

Figure 1.—Attributes of effective schools contrasted with barriers to implementing improvements in rural schools

Attributes	Barriers
Clear goals and core values	Failure to develop consensus on goals;
	Failure to integrate improvement into the existing system; and
	Uncritical acceptance of innovations.
Leadership	Lack of leaders with requisite commitment and skills to support the effort to change.
Good people and a good environment	Lack of expertise in planned change; Absence of training programs; and Inability to identify and use consultants.
Ability to solve problems and improve schools	Failure to diagnose problems accurately; and
	Failure to anticipate and resolve problems with implementation.
Ability to work with the community	Lack of experience with collaborative structures; and
	Absence of community participation.
Control and discretion	Lack of monitoring and feedback mechanisms;
	Poor communication among teachers and administrators; and
	Lack of teacher participation.

Sources: Corcoran, T. and Wilson, B.L. *The Search for Successful Secondary Schools: The First Three Years of the Secondary School Recognition Program*. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools. 1986.

Herriott, R.E. and Gross, N. *The Dynamics of Planned Educational Change: Case Studies and Analyses*. Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation. 1979.

Rosenblum, S. and Louis, K.S. *Stability and Change: Innovation in an Educational Context*. New York: Plenum Press. 1981.

Districts in the Rural Experimental Schools Program, which did receive significant infusion of Federal resources in a program of "planned" change, on the other hand, were often unable to agree on their goals. Although this inability derived from various circumstances—ranging from unclear communications to disagreement among teachers, parents, and administrators—the effect was the same. In many cases, integrating new efforts into a system which had not defined itself was difficult. In such a situation, there was little or no basis for critically examining the available promising practices.

Leadership

The Secondary School Recognition Program found that while effective principals had diverse styles of leadership, all articulated their high expectations and communicated their visions of school excellence. Principals also created the conditions that enabled their schools to progress toward the vision. To do this, they enlisted community support, simplified procedures, cut paperwork, protected teachers from classroom interruptions, and provided opportunities for teachers and parents to participate in efforts to improve the school. In contrast, some districts in the Rural Experimental Schools Program failed, at least in part, because they lacked leaders with the necessary commitment and/or skills to initiate the proposed changes and to provide the environment in which the changes could be effected.

Good People and a Good Environment

Schools recognized as exemplary are characterized by high percentages of teachers with master's degrees, low turnover, and extensive opportunities for professional development through inservice training, conference attendance and participation in committee work. Administrators in these schools work with teachers to make realistic plans to help the school achieve its goal. In contrast, insufficient expertise in planned change, a lack of training programs for administrators and teachers to provide them with necessary skills, and inability to use consultants all impeded efforts to improve the rural schools. In districts that suffered from these deficiencies, administrators and teachers had an insufficient set of core skills to make the necessary changes.

Ability To Solve Problems and Improve Schools

Schools recognized as exemplary faced many of the same problems that most schools encounter, including inadequate facilities, declining enrollments, and poor financial support. However, exemplary schools did not use their problems as excuses for maintaining the status quo. In some cases, particularly with inadequate facilities, people did the best they could do with what they had, and shifted the focus from the walls surrounding the classroom to the interactions of the people in it. At such schools, staff members identified problems directly related to learning and school improvements. Moreover, they carefully made realistic plans to deal with them. In contrast, many of the individuals involved in the Rural Experimental Schools Program did not diagnose these problems accurately or take account of the complex context in which they existed. Nor, in many cases, did they consider the additional problems—such as role overload and the need for extra training—that would arise as staff members took on new roles and increased responsibilities.

Ability To Work with the Community

Exemplary schools described positive working relationships with the community. They solicited parental support and involvement in their children's academic development; requested resources (including volunteer aides, materials, expertise, and money) from the community; and created activities—such as concerts, community beautification days and adopt-a-grandparent programs—that gave students opportunities for public service. Districts in the Rural Experimental Schools Program, on the other hand, had little experience in working in collaboration with other groups and suffered from a lack of community participation. The finding that "community and staff participation in the early phases of the planning process turned out to be negatively related to successful implementation"[7] demonstrates the importance of developing a long-term culture of community involvement rather than treating it as a "one-time" event for a specific purpose. This finding also underscores the importance of ensuring that the individuals involved have or get planning skills necessary to carry out various elements of an implementation strategy.

Control and Discretion

Principals in effective schools understood how to use control and discretion to get the best results. They controlled by monitoring their schools and their progress toward objectives. They collected information from teachers and parents, analyzed test scores, evaluated curricula, and used teacher evaluations to improve performance. At the same time, these principals allowed teachers to use their own discretion and recognized teachers' expertise in areas affecting their life in the classroom. In contrast, barriers to improvement, noted in the Rural Experimental Schools Program, included an absence of monitoring and feedback to identify problems early, poor lines of communication among teachers and administrators, and a lack of teacher participation in decisions which affected them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As figure 1 indicates, certain factors are characteristic of exemplary schools, whether rural, urban, or suburban in character. Conversely, when these factors are not present, their absence inevitably acts as a barrier to improvement efforts. Although these factors do not provide blueprints for action, they do suggest strongly that certain conditions must exist in rural settings to improve schools. Schools and/or districts must have certain basic capacities if they are to succeed in improving their programs.

Change is a complex process involving both the nature of the new idea as well as the context in which it will take effect. Transplanting promising practices, developed and validated in one site, to another site that is deficient in any of the areas described above, will significantly inhibit the "promise" of the practice introduced.

These studies, as well as the experience of those who have worked in school improvement, suggest four general approaches to improving rural schools. Each of these requires an initial assessment of the school or district's capacity to support positive change in the system. One approach is to identify sites that have

sufficient levels of these capacities and bring in promising practices to *strengthen* the quality of education they offer.

A second approach is to focus initially on *local system improvements* rather than on the implementation of promising practices. As Rosenblum and Louis suggest, "if many local conditions are 'wrong'—that is they will act as barriers to change—it may be worthwhile to work on system adjustments to improve the organization's basic health before plunging into a full-scale process of planned program change."[8]

A third approach, which combines the two strategies described above, involves *training and assistance* to strengthen the organization's basic health while implementing the innovation. The primary focus, however, should be on building the capacity for improvement.

A final, less immediately visible, but potentially powerful approach is that of addressing larger, non-local system issues which may operate at community, county, State, or regional levels to constrain improvement efforts. This strategy involves diverse activities such as: making changes in the nature and delivery of services to rural schools; redefining State-level guidelines and requirements; improving the performance of organizations which prepare teachers and administrators; and stimulating cooperative community development efforts.

Regardless of the improvement approach selected, rural schools interested in implementing promising practices should:

- Clearly define the nature of the improvement—including anticipated outcomes, and the roles and responsibilities of service providers and local school personnel;
- Thoroughly assess the conditions that are likely to hinder the improvement effort and develop plans to cope with them;
- Identify and address problems rather than their symptoms and accurately define difficulties in sustaining the effectiveness of improvement efforts; and
- Select strategies that either directly or indirectly enlarge a local school's capacity to improve and leverage available resources for the improvements.

Most important, they must learn from the experiences of the past, not only those of the Rural Experimental Schools Program but also from hundreds of other such efforts by social service agencies. These efforts failed because barriers to implementation were not properly identified and addressed. Historically, educators seem to have been tempted to move forward as quickly as possible with solutions that appeared attractive, but they did not consider underlying conditions. H.L. Mencken once said, "There is a solution to every problem: simple, quick and wrong." That observation should guide us when considering the implementation of a promising practice in a rural setting. Solutions that are wrong for the setting should be discarded and the search continued for those that will be the most effective for each rural school. They are out there.

End Notes

[1]Zaltman, G., Florio, D.H. and Sikorski, *L.A. Dynamic Educational Change: Models, Strategies, Tactics and Management*. New York: The Free Press, 1977.

[2]Corcoran, T. and Wilson, B.L. *The Search for Successful Secondary Schools: The First Three Years of the Secondary School Recognition Program*. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, 1986, p. ix.

[3] Ibid., p. 5.

[4]Herriott, R.E. and Gross, N. *Dynamics of Planned Educational Change: Case Studies and Analyses*. Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1979, p. 11.

[5]Rosenblum, S. and Louis, K.S. *Stability and Change: Innovation in an Educational Context*. New York: Plenum Press, 1981, p. x.

[6]Ibid., p. 269.

[7]Ibid., p. 252.

[8]Ibid., p. 262.

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Improving Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness in Rural Schools: Implications for Policymakers

Herman W. Meyers

Herman Meyers, associate professor of education at the University of Vermont, founder of the Vermont School Development Institute, and currently fellow at the National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development in Okemos, Michigan, specializes in research on education policy and on school effectiveness in rural settings.

This paper is a discussion of two related strategies for the improvement of rural schools—developing school leadership and increasing organizational effectiveness. The discussion is grounded in the belief that rural schools are not, by nature, deficient because they are smaller, more isolated or less anything than their urban or suburban counterparts. In fact, rural schools are probably more like other schools than they are different from them[1] and much of what we know about how to improve all schools will probably work in rural environments.

Nevertheless, there are differences between the demands of rural schools and the assumptions inherent in strategies for improving urban and suburban schools. For example, research on rural school development programs has documented the lack of school leaders with skills for managing innovation processes (Rosenblum and Louis, 1981). At the same time, in small rural communities, the organization which supports and often controls the school may be informal, personal and sometimes hidden from view. (Nachtigal, 1982). Both the politics of schools and their cultures (Deal, 1987) are no less complex because of their size, however. Those who would attempt to help rural schools become more effective must pay careful attention to subtle characteristics of their communities. The alternative may be what the cartoon character, Moon Mullins, described in the phrase: "What we want is results . . . . What we get is consequences."

This paper reports on selected strategies for providing skilled and wise leadership to rural, small schools, and presents ways to support the structure and culture of such schools. It concludes with recommendations for rural school improvement drawn from research on effective schools and the practice of school development.

Background

Policymaking for rural schools involves stakeholders in the executive and legislative branches of the Federal government, citizen organizations, private foundations, State legislatures, State education departments, and local boards of education. Waves of school reforms begun by some of these stakeholders in the early part of the 1980s still ebb and flow across the country, bringing structural as well as procedural changes to schools and colleges (Shannon, 1986).

Who makes education policy for rural America and who might be responsible for implementing changes is probably related to the proportion of education funding provided by each jurisdiction —Federal, State, and local. Countrywide in 1986, the Federal share was 6.4 percent, States accounted for 50.1 percent, and local districts paid 43.5 percent. In 21 States which might be considered to have a proportionately large rural population, the Federal share averaged 8.3 percent, the State share 51.2 percent, and the local share 40.5 percent.[2]

Initiatives to improve rural schools might begin at the Federal level but they are not likely to bear fruit unless supported at State and local levels. In this respect, the State share of school funding has increased by an average of nearly 8 percent in the past decade while the Federal share has decreased from 10 percent of the total to about 6 percent.[3]

To succeed, rural schools need better leaders and more effective support organizations (Rosenblum and Louis, 1981; Firestone, 1980). The question is how best to realize these goals. There have been attempts at the national level to improve rural schools during the past 15 years. (These were experimental models rather than large scale change efforts.) As noted in a national study of such projects (Nachtigal, 1982), some of the projects were based on generic assumptions about school improvement, including the need to better train leaders and to effect organizational change. It is to the lessons learned from these and other relevant efforts that we now turn.

Developing School Leadership

The past 10 years of experience have demonstrated that school leadership *can* be improved. For example, the Leadership Development Program of the Ford Foundation illustrated the potential in providing intensive leadership experiences for rural educators. It assumed a major deficit of rural school leadership to be isolation from the "mainstream" of American education (Nachtigal, op.cit.). Under the program, participants developed an appreciation for the complexity of the problems they faced in their communities (e.g., the existence of poverty and discrimination; possible difficulties working with local organizations) and at the same time, learned coping skills to build awareness and self confidence.

More generic leadership development initiatives have been funded by State departments of education and by universities. One of these, the Interactive Leadership Program at the University of Vermont (Paolucci-Whitcomb et al., 1987), was based upon principles of situational leadership (Hersey and Blanchard, 1982) and collaboration (Tikunoff and Ward, 1975), as well as concepts of long-range planning and the management of scarce resources (Ouchi, 1981). For example, it is crucial to have an appropriate leadership style, one that closely matches the demands of the community culture. Program internships thus provided direct experience in developing a repertoire of styles. Another challenge for rural communities is to improvise solutions to problems such as providing special education with fewer resources than are available to suburban communities. Management skills such as problem definition and analysis, collaborative decisionmaking, goal setting and offering useful feedback were thus included in the curriculum, providing interns with options instead of limits.

Similarities in goals and means exist between Vermont's program and the Peer-Assisted Leadership program (PAL) developed in 1983 at the Far West Laboratory in San Francisco (Barnett and Long, 1986). Both projects stressed skill in analyzing the principals' own and their colleagues' leadership styles. Both also offered experiences to develop the ability to gain support from colleagues, and to identify options for handling new situations.

Finding school leaders is the major thrust of the National Association of Secondary School Principals' Assessment Centers Program (McCormick, 1987). The American Association of School Administrators and the National Association of Elementary School Principals have similar initiatives. In these programs, aspiring school leaders are assessed in such areas as judgment, problem analysis, organizational ability, stress tolerance, leadership styles, sensitivity, and oral and written communication.

There are many leadership development activities which also benefit rural school organizations. The Mid-continent Regional Education Laboratory (McREL) offers an inservice program for administrators as part of its larger school improvement effort while staff development is a key component of school effectiveness initiatives in regional service organizations in Arkansas and New York. In addition, the Leadership in Educational Administration Development (LEAD) initiative of the U.S. Department of Education has established training and technical assistance centers in each State for the purpose of improving the skills of school administrators. These centers also strengthen the capacity of training providers throughout the State to deliver leadership development services.

What do studies of such programs reveal that might affect the design of future rural leadership training programs?

- Successful leaders tend to reflect the values of the community (Smith, 1981; Berger, 1984).
- Trust and understanding of the local social structure seem to be as important as professional expertise (McLaughlin, 1982).
- Leaders with high expectations are more likely to experience school improvements (McREL, 1985).
- Leadership in school change is an intensely political act (Firestone, 1980) involving teamwork, long-range planning, trust, honesty, and subtlety (Davy and Bramblett, 1982).

These points are consistent with earlier findings by Nachtigal (1980), Sher (1977), and Barker and Gump (1964).

However, when it comes to institutionalizing school development we still have not "got it quite right." In Vermont, for example, principals tell us that it is easy to push too fast for the school and the community to integrate a change. When this happens, critical resources are typically not forthcoming from the local school board. There is also a risk of indigenous leaders becoming (or looking and sounding) more like their external helpers from the university or State department of education than like community members. In this case, their metaphor for what often happens is, "I have seen the light at the end of the tunnel, and it's an on-coming train." People who are informed and aware will tend to avoid "on-coming trains."

In addition, it is important to recognize that leadership training is taking place in the context of imminent depletion of school supervisory ranks. Half of all principals in the United States and possibly two-thirds of the superintendents will retire in 5 years, according to the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (1987). State level policy planners report that the trend towards early retirement among school executives will drain more of the leadership than would be otherwise indicated by typical retirement ages of the population (McCormick, 1987). As for reasons, note that salaries of school leaders in some States, Vermont for example, have not kept pace with the increases in teaching fields. Moreover, candidates in administrator training programs tend not to want to take on the challenges of either urban inner-city or rural districts (McCormick, op.cit.). Meeting the leadership needs of rural schools will clearly need to include strategies for both attracting as well as keeping good leadership.

Recognizing the importance of improving school leadership leads to an interesting dilemma. Are we, by attempting to improve, acknowledging deficiencies? If so, we should be instructed by relevant research. In reviewing the progress of several rural school improvement projects, McLaughlin concluded that interventions based on a deficit model tended to fail. Defining rural school reform within the framework of the "rural schools are the problem" is a practice now widely called into question

(Nachtigal, 1982). Indeed, rural educators are increasingly rejecting the label of "school improvement" in favor of "school development." It is more than a subtle difference, symbolized by the directors of the Vermont School Improvement Institute voting unanimously in 1986 to change the name of the institute to the Vermont School Development Institute. The directors reasoned that schools sending teams to the Institute were coming to develop already good schools, not to improve poor ones.

Developing School Organizations

Rural school organizations, perhaps even more than those in other settings, reflect the characteristics of their communities. This does not mean, however, that all rural communities or their school organizations are similar. Rural schools usually do have tightly organized social structures—but the degree of organization depends upon how integrated the community is. Some rural communities are very tightly organized while others are not (Nachtigal 1982). School district organizations usually combine a multitude of special interest groups, each of which has its own agenda. This makes it less likely that a narrowly defined change will occur from a single project (Firestone, 1980). Again, research may guide us.

The figure below contrasts selected structural and cultural conditions of dynamic organizations (Hage and Aiken, 1970 and Berman and McLaughlin, 1979) and the descriptions of rural schools by Nachtigal (1980). It is meant to suggest that strategies for developing dynamic organizations may work as well in rural schools.

The match between the two schemes which follow is by no means perfect. Other characteristics of rural communities (e.g., cost cutting) are in conflict with those of dynamic organizations. But the match is close enough on the strengths of rural communities to offer some hope for development as well as points for intervention. For example, rural schools which tend to be non-bureaucratic will need to participate in the design of improvement strategies rather than obtain them through a bureaucracy.

Figure 1—Structural and Cultural Conditions of Dynamic Organizations and Rural Schools

Dynamic Organizations:	Rural Schools:
Low formalization or control	Non-bureaucratic
Low stratification, decentralization	Informal, non-specialized
Emphasis on quality vs. quantity	Emphasis on quality
High job satisfaction	Self-sufficiency
Open boundaries to environment	Respond to the environment
Climate of mutual trust	Personal/tightly linked

Another example of using the knowledge about dynamic organizations in rural settings is the strategy of working within the boundaries of "organizational culture." This refers to the uniqueness of rural school organization elements, with its specific rituals, symbols, and beliefs (Carlson and Matthes, 1987). Thus, rituals that might reinforce the connection of the school to its community, such as a talent show where administrators participate with students, can be seen as a strategy for improving the organization (Deal, 1987).

Recent attempts to develop rural schools emphasize community-dependent critical elements, like parent involvement, or new curricula that result from assessment of a single school. (Schmidt, 1983; Meyers, 1986; Carlson, 1985). Common elements include such factors as a cooperative planning process and a facilitator. The McREL project prepared guidelines for the development of "clusters" of districts wherein the agenda for change is school-based rather than imposed from without. (See the Nachtigal paper in this volume.—*Ed.*)

Carlson (1985) found high levels of community involvement and norms which supported open communication and cooperative planning in a successful school development project based upon the effective schools model (Gauthier, 1981; Lezotte, 1985). The project was designed by the school with help from university professors. Content of the extensive inservice program (115 courses and workshops in a 3-year period) were drawn from a needs assessment conducted by university researchers, but

interpreted by the school improvement team. Five schools were involved in sharing costs for inservice and other development activities. One of the most striking results was the belief among school personnel that school improvement had led to a revitalization of the community and an increase in town property values. Interviews with local real estate agents confirmed that this view was widespread.

In creating clusters, McREL addressed the issue of insufficient resources for rural schools. The concept entails having neighboring schools work together for mutual benefits in school improvement. Benefits are enhanced when working relationships also involve institutions of higher education, intermediate service agencies, and State agencies. Schools and helping agencies now have informal linkages as well in Vermont (Meyers, 1986); in New York (Fitzgerald and Kelly, 1986); and in Arkansas (Spear, 1987). The informal linkage seems driven by common interests and needs. For example, the universities need places to do instruction and research and the districts need inservice training and evaluation. Schmidt (1983) describes some linkages between districts (with and without the involvement of other agencies) in New York, Minnesota, and Alabama. This type of linkage seems to maximize the dollars spent for technical assistance by spreading the costs over larger populations.

With respect to the articulation of the problem, or "focus for change" in McLaughlin's terms, the Vermont School Development Institute assumed that no single focus would support long-term change in rural districts because stakeholders in the planning process tended to be coalitions of many disparate interests. While each group might hold a particular interest in abeyance for a short time, in the long run all needs would have to be accounted for. Experience now suggests that this is partly right, in that any specific change, e.g., mastery learning, will tend to be short-lived unless broadly supported by the community. But a focus on expected results of more generalized strategies seems necessary in order for long-term planning to take place. Agreement on goals, such as increased student achievement or decreases in the dropout rate, seems essential to justify the sacrifices which must be made by teachers, communities, and administrators in the process of school development.

Towards the Design of Development Programs

The school development literature reveals principles which can facilitate improvement in rural schools. These include:

- Focus on a central purpose, broadly defined by the school and community;
- Emphasize long-term rather than short-term goals;
- Avoid defining the problem in deficit terms except as deficits apply to student outcomes;
- Allow for long-term development (3-5 years);
- Emphasize intra-district collaboration and networking;
- Facilitate cost-savings in staff development by collaborating with other districts; and
- Balance "trickle down" solutions with "bubble up" approaches to problem solving.

In Vermont, these principles were applied in the design and operation of the School Development Institute. The research base is that of effective teaching (Gage, 1963; Travers, 1973; Wittrock, 1986) and effective schools (Edmonds, 1983; Brookover and Lezotte, 1979; Rutter, 1983). The central purpose for schools they assist is to provide equal educational opportunity—as measured in terms of access, participation, and education outcomes—for all students regardless of family background, sex, ethnic origin or handicap. But discrepancies in the achievement of low-income children and females were not overlooked.

Regarding process, without collaboration and mutual support among the schools in the district involved and the Institute, few, if any, inservice activities could have taken place. Most solutions to school problems were devised during the project—cross-age tutoring, for example, and mathematics and science curriculums which targeted objectives across grade levels. Computerized record-keeping systems and school climate measures were provided by Institute consultants.

Intervention strategies affected student achievement. In one school over the course of five years, all low-income students moved from average achievement below minimum mastery (on the Metropolitan Achievement Tests) to above minimum mastery. In subsequent years, analysis of achievement at the school showed no difference between low-income and other students at the 50th percentile. The school obtained gains in school climate, enrichment activities for all children, and teacher attitudes as well (Carlson, 1985).[4]

Recommendations for Policymakers

In general, there is no "one best solution" to the problem of facilitating the process of rural school development. Providing linkages among the likely partners in the process is probably one of the best strategies to ensure that organizational arrangements will counter the effects of limited resources. There are many models employed, whether initiated by regional laboratories, State departments of education, regional service agencies, universities, or districts themselves. Arrangements may be formal or informal.

There are situations in which rural schools may be "dues paying members" in State-mandated regional service agencies. Less formal, voluntary associations with regional service agencies likewise provide school development services. There are also even less formal arrangements initiated by regional laboratories, universities, or State departments of education. Finally, some school districts initiate their own voluntary and informal associations in order to share programs and support other forms of school development.

Policymakers should leave the choice of linkage model to local school leadership. Since the defining characteristic of each type of arrangement is its level of formality, it makes sense to match the type of linkage with the type of school and community. That is, traditional or stable communities might benefit from more formal relationships, while communities in transition would require more flexible, open arrangements. Each delivery system identified above has its special strengths and weaknesses regarding cost, autonomy, diversity, resource sharing, and prospects. For example, the more formal the system, the more expensive it is likely to be to construct and the less autonomous will be its members. But the system might have greater longevity and hence greater chances to effect long-term change.

However, to make the "right choice," the one that has the best chance of success, local school leadership requires the knowledge and skill it takes to do a careful analysis of complex relationships between the school and community. By providing higher salaries, greater status in the community, and better administrator training programs, policymakers can help schools attract and retain school leaders skilled in making the right choices.

Federal policymakers can provide leadership by insisting that broad national goals, such as equality of educational opportunity, are kept front and center in the public debate; by insisting on measures of that equality; and by providing resources to continue the search for alternative ways of achieving it. For the foreseeable future it is likely that rural areas will continue to harbor subtle, yet important, conditions (such as community types, norms, and political processes) which spell the success or failure of improvement efforts. These conditions must be better understood if State and local reforms are to bear fruit. The Federal government should invest in studying these conditions.

At the State level, policies which support the development of highly qualified school leaders must form the basis of school improvement. The State share of funding may need to be increased in areas where dislocation of the rural economy has decimated local resources. Increasing the State share should aid in meeting higher standards for certification and larger salaries for administrators. State policymakers can also support local administrators to become more visible and respected by involving them in the policy arena. States should recognize the responsibility of State education agencies and institutions of higher education in the development of a skilled administrative cadre.

State policymakers also have the responsibility to develop clear and reliable indicators of both the processes and outcomes of

schooling. By allowing for innovation and encouraging collaboration, new State standards need not be barriers to creative development. Enlightened State policy would not penalize small, rural districts that also happen not to meet immediate standards, but rather would provide the processes and supports which take the long view.

At the local level, decisionmakers must recognize the harsh reality that highly skilled school leadership will be drawn to industry and other occupations competing for the "best and the brightest." Consequently, increasing support for school leadership development is indicated. As with State officials, local policymakers must develop clear guidelines for what they expect as appropriate school outcomes. Rural officials ought to welcome the opportunity for collaboration with other districts, agencies, and institutions of higher education.

The process of improving schools is a never-ending one. Still, it is sometimes difficult to raise enthusiasm for yet another initiative. But rural educators who put their students first can be expected to try and try again. Ronald Edmonds, speaking a decade ago about the role of government and social science in the education of the children of the poor, made the following observation:

> We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children. . . . We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

These words apply with equal force to the education of children in the rural communities of America.

End Notes

[1]This assertion follows from the observation that ". . . 100 years of implementing a common school system policy has resulted in more similarities than differences" (Nachtigal, 1982).

[2]National Education Association statistics, 1985-86, as reported in *Education Vital Signs, Vol. II: American School Board Journal*, October 1986.

[3]National Education Association, op.cit.

[4]This school, Hardwick Elementary, enrolls students from predominately low-income families. It received 77 percent of its total operating budget from the State of Vermont in 1986. In 1988, as a result of the progress it had made, the school was recognized as an Outstanding Elementary School and received the U.S. Secretary of Education's National Excellence Award.—*Ed.*

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The McREL Approach to Rural School Improvement

Paul M. Nachtigal

Paul Nachtigal, former superintendent of a small, rural school, staff member of a State education agency, and monitor/evaluator of a major foundation's school improvement program, conducted a national study of efforts to improve rural education, and currently directs the rural education program for the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory.

Ten years ago, I was responsible for a national study of 13 programs designed and funded at the Federal, State, and local levels. Supported by the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute of Education, the programs aimed at improving rural education. The sites chosen for these programs captured—as far as possible—the diversity that characterizes rural education. The Federal programs included an Experimental Schools site, a Teacher Corps program, an Urban/Rural Project, and a regional laboratory's community involvement strategy. Statewide efforts included a program to upgrade teacher preparation from 2- to 4-year certification, and a rural political action group trying to preserve local control. A teacher center, a school improvement/community development effort, and a "Foxfire" type program represented local efforts to improve rural education. Each of the programs appears as a case study in *Rural Education: In Search of a Better Way,* published by Westview Press in Boulder, Colorado.

The study provided new insights into the nature of rural schools and communities and suggested guidelines for improving rural education successfully. These insights and guidelines subsequently provided the framework for the rural school improvement program of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL). This paper briefly reviews what we learned from this study and from applying what we learned at selected small schools in a seven-state region.

The Rural Community Context

As a result of their size and relative isolation, rural communities conduct business differently from their urban counterparts. The smaller and more isolated the community, the more pronounced the differences will be. Rural communities tend to be very personal and tightly linked, whereas urban ones are usually more

impersonal and loosely connected. In a small town, what happens at school is everybody's business. Individuals living and/or working in rural areas tend to be generalists rather than specialists. Doctors, when available, are general practitioners, and teachers are often certified in more than one subject. Communication is more likely to be oral than written, and who the speaker is, is as important—or more important—than what he or she says. Small towns also lack bureaucracy, except for what outside agencies impose. These characteristics require that outside agencies tailor their school improvement strategies to suit the way small, rural schools operate.

A Rural School Improvement Strategy

When our work at McREL began in 1980, the problems of small, rural schools were attracting little attention. Conventional wisdom dictated that making schools larger or adopting improvement strategies developed in urban or suburban areas would solve these problems. Neither of these alternatives was feasible. Since sparse population, long distance, and difficult terrain prevented most of the schools from getting bigger, consolidating into larger units was not an option. Adopting improvement efforts designed by and for larger schools was also not the solution. In fact, this "one best system," mass-production model of education was a big part of the problem.

In improving rural schools, we had two objectives. First, we wanted to create a forum within the rural education community to address and develop solutions to those problems that small, rural schools share. Second, we wanted these schools to get actively involved in testing alternatives to the "one best system" that would build on the strengths of smallness and take advantage of the close relationships between rural schools and their communities.

The McREL strategy was based on what we learned from the study referred to above. Our findings, which have been corroborated by other change studies, show that:

- Local residents must first recognize that a problem needs attention. ("If it ain't broke, don't fix it.")
- Individuals at the local level must play a significant role in designing the solutions—which need to have a home-grown flavor.
- Local improvement efforts, which seldom have the resources necessary to proceed alone, require outside assistance, but this assistance has to be on the community's terms—what they need, when they need it.
- Improvements are more likely to succeed if several schools collaborate because working together provides the moral support to move ahead.

With very limited funds, the lab incorporated these findings into a program that could be applied to a region covering seven States with approximately 2,500 school districts—two-thirds of which were small and rural. In developing a strategy, we followed several steps:

- We identified school districts of approximately the same size—generally involving five to seven schools (within reasonable driving distance of each other) into "clusters." Similar size suggested that they would be experiencing similar problems; relative proximity enabled school representatives to meet without requiring unreasonable time and expense.
- We asked an individual from a neighboring college or university (who had expertise in and commitment to the improvement of small, rural schools) to facilitate the cluster's work. It was a distinct advantage when these individuals had control over staff time and resources in their regular positions.
- Wherever possible, we asked a person from the State education agency, sympathetic to small, rural schools, to participate in the cluster. These schools began exploring alternatives to the "one best system" that were better suited to small schools. Sooner or later they would run counter to existing rules and regulations. Having assistance in working around these roadblocks was better than fighting them head on.
- Cluster members had to commit themselves to participate for a minimum of 3 to 5 years—because modifying the operation of rural schools takes time.

- Most importantly, the schools themselves—not the university, State agency, or the Lab—had to define the cluster's agenda.

If the participants agreed to follow these steps, the Lab did two things. First, as a neutral party, it helped agencies (with no previous experience working together) to collaborate and cooperate. To facilitate cooperation, the Lab had to take account of each group's stereotypes of the others. Some feared that the State education department would be a regulatory agency committed to school consolidation as the only way to improve rural education. Others thought that the university's representatives would be interested primarily in promoting one more off-campus course. Local districts tended to be reluctant to work together because of the climate fostered by interscholastic competition and the fear that if they collaborated, consolidation would immediately follow. Second, the Lab was prepared to provide limited financial resources for travel and consulting services. Depending on the nature of the agenda, the amount of assistance given to the clusters ranged from $2,000 to $4,500 per year.

The Cluster Experience

At the end of the 5 years during which the Lab promoted this strategy, 10 clusters were operating in six of seven States. In addition to the State education agencies, the clusters involved seven institutions of higher education and 66 school districts serving more than 27,000 students. The clusters focused on:

- staff development;
- curriculum development;
- inservice training for superintendents and principals;
- cooperative planning for sharing programs and resources;
- instructional uses of the micro-computer; and
- involving rural schools in economic development.

A discussion of the experience in four States follows.

South Dakota: The cluster in South Dakota included six schools, ranging in size from 113 to 267 students, in grades K-12, working in cooperation with the Division of Education at South Dakota State University. The dean of the division was interested in establishing closer relationships with rural districts since most of the SDSU graduates take their first positions in those schools.

Since this was the Lab's first cluster, agreeing on a common agenda was a challenge. There was not so much disagreement, as a lack of sufficient enthusiasm to move ahead. After several meetings and little progress, the cluster decided that the dean and two of his staff should ask teachers, students, board members, and community leaders in each district about the strengths and weaknesses of their schools. These interviews were written up as a state-of-the-schools report. In at least one site, all school patrons received a copy. Although many praised the advantages of small classes and the ability to pay attention to individual differences during site visits, classroom observations showed that teachers actually were using strategies for teaching large classes. Exploring approaches that would capitalize on the strengths of smallness became the focus of an ongoing, cooperative staff development program.

Missouri: The Missouri cluster, originally convened by a member of the State education agency cooperating with a rural sociologist from the University of Missouri, focused on improving and expanding the instructional uses of the micro-computer. Although the districts all had computers, no one was happy with how they were being used. The superintendents realized that they were confronted with a staff development problem. The districts agreed to form a consortium for the purpose of jointly hiring a full-time person to provide in-service training on computer use in the classroom. Recognizing that departmental staff needed this kind of training as much as those in the field, the State department representative requested that the department be accepted as an equal partner in the consortium.

The consortium sponsored in-service sessions tailored to the needs of each participating district, the State department, and many cooperative efforts as well. One of these was a "writing across the curriculum" project using word-processing technology. Like other consortium programs, the participating districts and the university jointly funded the project. When this cluster activity

began in 1982, the seven districts had a combined inventory of 28 computers. A year-and-a-half later, they had 97, along with the necessary software and peripherals—a 350 percent increase in the number of their computers. Spin-offs from the consortium included the formation of two similar consortia in the State, and the development of a computer/floppy disk system for collecting annual teacher certification and assignment data from local districts. This system, which requires less time and results in more accurate information, is now being used to submit more than 90 percent of the teacher data statewide.

Nebraska: Four rural districts in south-central Nebraska requested assistance with a cooperative curriculum development project. Among the five districts involved in the initial discussions, one district decided it could not commit itself to such an extensive effort. Developing a curriculum (K-12) is a sizeable task for any district, but it is even more onerous when there is only one teacher for each subject or grade. Pursuing the task together would bring to bear four times the resources, and result in a much richer product than if each district were to attack the job alone. The districts solicited assistance from the university and from State department consultants, but wanted consultants to act as resource people, not to tell the teachers what they should do, or do the work for them. The Lab used its neutral status to conduct separate orientation sessions to establish the necessary ground rules.

Developing the curriculum started with strategic planning. The teachers and administrators from participating schools were asked to envision the kind of world that graduates would encounter in the year 2000. The superintendents wanted a forward-looking curriculum designed to capitalize on the strengths of small schools. A curriculum development specialist selected by participating schools orchestrated the 2-year effort. Students were dismissed on selected days to allow teachers and administrators to gather at a host school to work on developing the curriculum. Teachers worked together to define course objectives and develop instructional activities that would contribute to the overall goals of their respective schools.

Although the schools developed the curriculum together, they tailored their programs to suit their own needs. No one wanted a mandatory common curriculum. Area newspapers featured the project because it seemed unusual for schools that competed on the athletic field on Fridays to cooperate to improve their educational programs on Wednesdays. While the project was underway, two of the schools even played each other in the State football playoff.

North Dakota: The largest of the clusters developed when 16 districts in a two-county area on the Canadian border formed a multi-purpose consortium to facilitiate staff development and share programs and personnel. The initial impetus for this cluster came from the county superintendent who wanted to emphasize school improvement instead of regulations and data collection. The neighboring University of North Dakota played an important role in getting the cluster underway. The Dean of the School of Education and some of his staff interviewed all 16 superintendents to determine how and on what terms schools could cooperate to improve their programs. They suggested that some of the proposed activities could serve sub-clusters, while others, like staff development, could involve all. Perhaps the superintendents' most difficult decision was to adopt a common school calendar, setting aside days when in-service activities could occur.

This cluster has succeeded in securing a small foundation grant. The cluster used some of the money to hire a part-time facilitator to plan and organize the cooperative in-service program, identify new opportunities for shared activities, and keep the consortium moving ahead. The cluster is currently exploring ways to tie the districts together electronically to deliver advanced and other specialty classes that are now impractical for a single district.

Critical Ingredients

The critical ingredients for a rural school improvement cluster include:

Purpose: A cluster can be organized for any purpose if cooperation and the pooling of funds would benefit participants and address their common problems.

Time: Members must commit at least 3 years to cluster activites because time is necessary to establish trust among participants; help them evolve a common agenda; and develop and implement programs that serve all of them.

Membership: Clusters seem to work best if the member schools are of similar size and are experiencing common problems that need common solutions. Even for similar problems, schools which vary significantly in size tend to have different methods and resources for addressing those problems.

Support Organizations: The support of interested and committed persons from universities and from the State education agency are important for successful cluster operations. Linking with these agencies provides ready access to technical assistance, increases understanding of rural education, and provides the opportunity to review rules and regulations *vis-a-vis* small, rural schools.

Size: Clusters work best with at least three, but no more than seven or eight members.

Location: Members must be close enough to allow for frequent meetings and enable them to share services and/or programs.

Organization: Organizational structure is minimal. The survival of the cluster concept is based on its usefulness to the participants.

Leadership: Someone needs to be the facilitator or convener. Sometimes it's helpful to have someone from a local college or university play this role. Local school personnel can then operate as co-equals without one district's seeming to "take charge." Superintendents must also take an active role in the cluster's operation even when the agenda primarily involves teachers from the participating districts.

Frequency of Meetings: Clusters work best if superintendents' meetings are scheduled every 4-6 weeks. Frequent meetings demonstrate the importance of cluster activities; show the superintendents' support of them; keep the consortium on track; maintain the working relationship essential to consortium effectiveness; and help generate new ideas for the cluster to consider.

Finance: If the consortium involves pooling funds from each district to hire a specialist or buy equipment, it works best if one school takes care of fiscal and administrative matters. Each district contributes an agreed amount to this school, which then pays bills and accounts for funds.

Conclusions

Throughout our work, we have been careful not to create just another organization. We wanted the clusters to live or die on their own merit. If the activities were sufficiently valuable they would continue. If not, they would cease to exist. Because the Laboratory changed the focus of its Rural, Small Schools Program, nurturing these clusters has not received as much attention as in the earlier years. In spite of this lack of attention and virtually no financial resources from the Lab, most of the clusters have continued to exist, and several new ones appear ready to form.

Schools and institutions of higher education are also recognizing the benefits of cooperative action. State education agencies also play a crucial role in establishing a favorable climate for such cooperation. In those States where consolidation is no longer an issue, cooperation comes more easily. Wherever this is perceived as a threat, however, districts are reluctant to admit that they are not self-sufficient.

By reducing isolation and using limited resources more effectively, clusters can overcome many of the problems associated with small schools. Regional laboratories play an important role in initiating a cluster approach to school improvement. Their neutrality and access to ideas and resources are essential for getting such programs underway. Through the labs' efforts, a network of individuals and institutions now can handle many issues that run the gamut from conducting studies on rural education to implementing Congressional mandates of the Rural Education Initiative.

Appendix

In addition to the individuals whose papers are published in this volume, others featured at the March 1987 Rural Education Symposium in Washington, D.C., are listed below.

Name	Association	Title of Presentation
Sally Brinkema	Project Coordinator, B.O.C.S., Haxtun, Colorado	"Second Career Certification"
Peter Corcoran	Teacher Training Program, College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, Maine	"Teacher Education Based on Human Ecology"
Betty Deaton	Education Program Supervisor, Arkansas State Department of Education, Little Rock, Arkansas	"Improving Basic Skills Through the Use of Computer Instruction"
Paul De Largy	Director, Center for Community Education, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia	"Rural Education Action Learning"
William H. Deming	Executive Director, Rural Schools Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York	Panel discussion reactor
Sena Fitzpatrick	Pine Hill School, Ramah, New Mexico	"World of Words: Process Language Arts Program"
Lou Gappmayer	Principal, Bozeman Senior High School, Bozeman, Montana	"Montana Rural Schools"

Name	Association	Title of Presentation
Steven Grubis	Associate Professor, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Fairbanks, Alaska	"Preparing Educators for the Bush"
Andrew Gulliford	Photojournalist, American House Museum, Lima, Ohio	"Small is Beautiful: American Country Schools in Historical Perspective"
Mike Hargis	Director, Arch Ford Cooperative, Morrilton, Arkansas	"A Historical Perspective of Arkansas' Education Cooperatives"
Smith Holt	Secretary of Education, Governor's Office, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	"Technology-enhanced Learning Systems"
Peg Koetsch	Curator of Education, Madison Arts Center, Madison, Wisconsin	"Mini-Museum: Student-designed Art Exhibition"
Arnold J. Moore	Dean, College of Education, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, Mississippi	"The Impact of Cultural Isolation on Rural Education"
Randall Morris	Executive Director, Black Hills Special Services Cooperative, Deadwood, South Dakota	"Partnerships in Education: Utilizing Support of Employment"
Paul Norton	Executive Director, Wisconsin Educational Communications Board and Manager of Wisconsin Public Radio and Television, Madison, Wisconsin	"How Wisconsin Public Broadcasting Has Kept its Eye on the Squirrel"
Joyce Reinke	Director, Personnel Development, Oregon State Department of Education, Salem, Oregon	"More with Four: An Alternative Scheduling Program for Small, Rural Schools"
Bill Richards	Director, Division of Curriculum, Department of Educational and Cultural Services, Augusta, Maine	Panel discussion reactor

Name	Association	Title of Presentation
Sandra Sargent	Special Education Specialist, Cabell County Schools, Huntington, West Virginia	"Interagency Collaboration: How It Can Work for Schools"
E. Robert Stephens	Professor, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland	Panel discussion reactor
Sandra J. Terril	Superintendent, El-Saline School, Salina, Kansas	Panel discussion reactor
Bernard Vavrek	Coordinator, Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, Clarion University, Clarion, Pennsylvania	"The Improvement of Rural Libraries"
Paula Waller	Acting Director, Panhandle Area Educational Cooperative Chipley, Florida	"Panhandle Area Educational Cooperative: PAEC Setter in Florida's Teacher Education"
Dennis J. Wydra	Director, Pennsylvania Teleteaching Project, Mansfield, Pennsylvania	"Distance Education in Pennsylvania"

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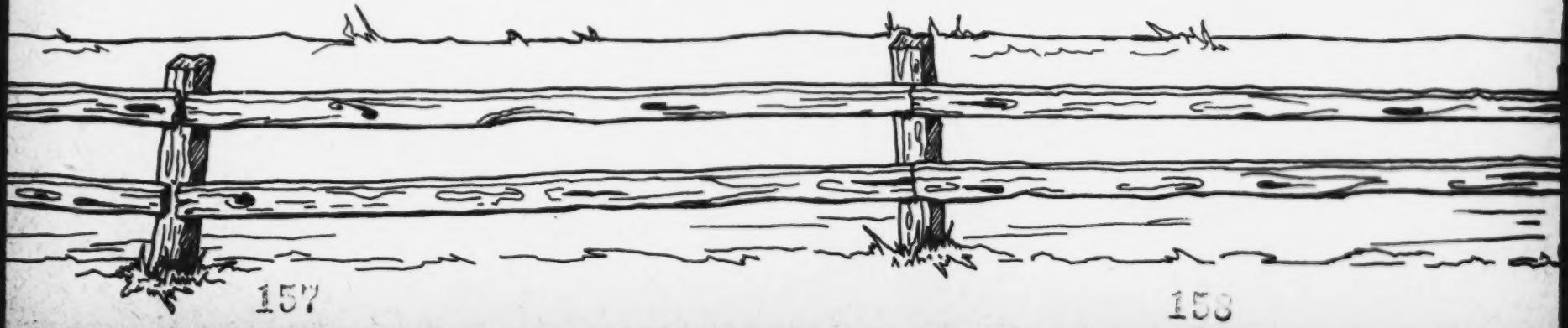
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